

Transformative Education: Chronicling a Pedagogy for Social Change

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Llano Grande Center

This article chronicles the work of the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development, an educational nonprofit organization in South Texas, by following the narrative of one of its students and two of the authors, who are also founders of Llano Grande. Through the use of ethnography, visuals, and storytelling, they present an emerging theory of practice and a hybrid methodology that has contributed to the development of the work, the school, and the community. An activist agenda informed by practice and supported with theory is woven through the text in biographical form. The text also documents the cornerstones of the work: building strong relationships; work originating from self, place, and community; and engaging in meaningful work. When integrated into a seamless practice, this combination of guiding principles yields a certain power that youth and adults alike begin to negotiate within and between their peers, teachers, and community for change. This sense of self, efficacy, and power then informs much of their work as adults. [Latino epistemology and education, activist ethnography, Llano Grande Center, storytelling, community as text, pedagogy of hope]

Carmen's Chronicle

When Carmen Valdez was 12 years old, her mother hired a coyote to transport her two young daughters and herself from Mexico into the United States. They fled particular domestic troubles and risked the dangerous sojourn, "para buscar la vida" (to search for life), as Carmen noted in her oral history a few years later. They began their trip in Durango, where Carmen and her sister had been fully immersed in school life and where their mother took odd jobs to make ends meet. Life was good for Carmen in Durango; she was primed, after all, to be the school's next *abanderada*, an honor given to a top student who would carry the Mexican flag at school functions, and she also had her circle of close friends. Her mother, however, found it difficult to provide for the family, particularly after escaping a controlling and abusive husband who had previously been the main provider. One fateful evening, when Carmen, her mother, and her sister slipped into the inner tubes that would float them across the Rio Grande River, the river that also served as the U.S.–Mexico international boundary, they did not know what to expect. Crossing was a profound experience, and it would become part of a narrative that would help Carmen generate personal and academic power as she moved through high school and into higher education.

Anthropology & Education Quarterly, Vol. 39, Issue 1, pp.3–22, ISSN 0161-7761, online ISSN 1548-1492.
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DOI:10.1111/j.1548-1492.2008.00002.x.

Two years later, when Carmen enrolled at the local public high school, Edcouch-Elsa High (also called "E-E High"), she was surprised and even emboldened by the fact that her life narrative was respected. Her English teachers asked about her story, her history teachers encouraged her to write about it, and others in the school and community mentored her and her mother so that they would work toward becoming legal residents of the United States. Early in her high school days, she connected with a group of teachers, students, and community members involved in the work of the Llano Grande Center, an educational institution based in rural South Texas. In short, Carmen's story, as was the case for stories of numerous other students at E-E High, became a central part of the text and curriculum that guided her four years of academic, social, cultural, political, and intellectual growth.

Road Map

This article describes the community context in which we work and the sociopolitical and historical forces that have impacted a particular rural community and its schools. We reflect on data collection processes, and look at data itself through a show-and-tell format that takes the reader to our community and into the transformative process at the micro and macro levels (Guajardo and Guajardo 2004). Central to the article is Carmen's chronicle, the story of a young lady that in other circles may have been seen as a challenge, or even a burden to society. Carmen is a specific person, but she is also a metaphor for hundreds of young people who have participated with and given shape to the work of the Llano Grande Center at E-E High. Through her narrative, the text looks at the work of the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development and at how an emerging hybrid theory informs both Carmen's narrative, as well as the broader scope of work. The work is multilayered and interdisciplinary. We show it through a series of stories that guide us into an articulation of methods, theory, and data. We find storytelling as a critical mode through which we conduct our day-to-day work, build our curriculum, and enhance our pedagogies. It also serves as the genre through which we explain the historical context. Storytelling is the way we place ourselves in the middle of the text, as we engage as reflective practitioners. Reflecting on selected stories from the field, we also attempt to answer the following questions:

- What can activist research look like—for students and for academics?
- What emerging theories and methods support education and community change?
- What strategies sustain engaged teaching and learning processes?
- What is the impact when the concepts of self, place, and community become the content-text for the teaching and learning process?

We employ curricular and pedagogical approaches that we believe are generalizable and applicable to other schools and communities. We don't believe the work is replicable, because conditions, history, and people are different; Paulo Freire (2000) warned us about replication. But there are principles, strategies, and ideas that can be taken and integrated into other cultural and political contexts. As we reflect on a range of Carmen's stories, we look at the pedagogical process that has yielded power for Carmen, and for our community.

The Landscape—Context

E-E High is located in rural South Texas, 15 miles north of the Texas–Mexico border, in a region defined by an economy and culture built on a century-long investment in agriculture. The Spanish settlers of the 17th and 18th centuries warned future settlers of the region about large-scaled agricultural pursuits because of weather and the scarcity of fresh water sources (Miller 1980). Settlers from northern states who came to the borderland region of South Texas during the late 19th and early 20th centuries had other ideas. They established land development companies and chambers of commerce that promoted the place as a “Magic Valley,” as a semi-tropical paradise where “cheap land” and “cheap labor” were plentiful. Through massive public investment and through the overuse of the Rio Grande River, the only significant freshwater source in the region, developers gave shape to an agricultural society. This new society was fueled by the entrepreneurial spirit and capital of white northerners, and essentially built on the backs of Mexican laborers (Guajardo and Guajardo 2004; Montejano 1987; Zamora 1993). The impact of this economic dynamic would be profound, as a two-tiered social structure emerged, where whites controlled the resources and comprised the ruling class while Mexican immigrants populated the ranks of the laboring class. Schools mirrored this reality. White children were expected to attend school and pursue higher education, whereas Mexican children were expected to leave school early and join the agricultural labor force. Political and social structures followed similar patterns in communities across the borderland of South Texas (Foley et al. 1974; García 1997; Navarro 1998; Shockley 1974).

We were raised in this environment. As immigrants from Mexico and as members of the migrant farm-working stream, we were tracked at E-E schools between our elementary years and the time we completed high school. During those years, we also saw a large majority of our classmates drop out of school, and by the 1980s, when we graduated from high school, the community and educational system had created a culture of low expectations regarding Mexican immigrant children going to college. Their place in the community and in the economy was clear. One local elder recalled a white bus driver’s refusal to drive the school bus closer to where the Mexican people lived by saying, “Mexicans aren’t supposed to get educated anyway. You are meant to work in the fields, as laborers” (Támez 1998). Moreover, the schools followed curricula and practiced pedagogies intended to assimilate youth into the mainstream culture. We recall all too vividly the deculturalization process we experienced throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s (Guajardo and Guajardo 2004; Spring 1998). But the community had also experienced a youth-led revolt, when in 1968 more than 140 Mexican American students staged a vigorous school walkout that became a catalyst for institutional and community change (Guajardo and Guajardo 2004). The students protested against, among other things, the lack of Mexican American studies courses at the high school, as well as the punitive actions school personnel took to discipline students who spoke Spanish on the school grounds. The E-E High School Walkout of 1968 shifted the racial power dynamics in the community. It signaled the beginning of a complex community development trajectory marked by uncertainty, but also filled with opportunity. It was an environment primed for deep social change.

Not a week went by without the locals rallying behind someone in need: a barbecue for a cancer patient, a chicken sale to pay for a funeral, or a fundraiser for a family that lost their home in a fire—philanthropic impulses in our community were strong

and steady. It was a community that exported its human capital for the greater good: migrant farm workers to pick crops in California, Michigan, the Texas Panhandle, and many other places; and young men and women to serve the country militarily. (Dozens served in WWII, six died in Vietnam, and legions of others have served in other capacities.) This community was a place with a huge heart and lively spirit and passion—a place that nurtured big ideas. We thought we lived at the best location on earth, although historical forces of oppression perpetuated a status quo of economic impoverishment and low levels of expectations. Our school was classified as the poorest school district in Texas, based on the property tax base throughout the time we were E-E students, and even during the first few years when we returned to teach in 1990.

We enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin (UT) after high school and did so with a number of other E-E High graduates; it had been many years since any E-E High alum had enrolled at UT. Within two years we formed a community of students that numbered more than 30, all from the same South Texas hometown. The group engaged in a sustained conversation that spanned several years during the 1980s, and through those dialogues we imagined that we would come back home after college to build new institutions, to change our schools, and to create new opportunities. We discussed how school curricula should be more reflective of regional and community history, how teaching and learning could be done differently, and how more people, and youth in particular, should participate in civic life. Those conversations gave shape to what would become the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development.

When we returned to teach at E-E High in 1990, we created an aggressive college preparation program. There was no question about the quality of the talent at E-E High. Like any community, we had smart, ambitious students who wanted to enrich their lives, but that year only 28 percent of E-E graduates subsequently enrolled in college (González 1998). This was not a new problem; E-E graduates had not fared well in college admissions—ever. We decided to attack this problem through a radical approach to college preparation: our goal was to get as many E-E students as possible into Ivy League universities. In doing so, we would improve the number of students going to college, and just as importantly, we would revolt against the chronic low levels of expectation. By 1996 we had placed more than 30 E-E students in Ivy League schools, and the community began to look at itself differently. Positive media attention descended on the high school. Locals began to feel better about themselves, and the college-going rate rose. In 2007, more than 60 percent of E-E High graduates attended college, and today we continue to place students in Ivy League and other exclusive universities across the country. The new reality is that the townspeople expect young people to attend college. A profound cultural shift has occurred, although it has taken a generation to transpire.

When we discussed returning home after college, we envisioned a body of work centered in the schools: a work that included community, history, and people's stories. As college students, we were deeply influenced by the seminal scholarship of Américo Paredes, the bold activism of George I. Sanchez, and the innovative theorizing of Gloria Anzaldúa. But we were even more moved by the stories of our *padres*, our *tios* and *tias*, and the narrative of our community. By the mid 1990s, our college preparatory work had gained acclaim for breaking stereotypes and raising expectations, but we fell short in the area of curriculum, instruction, and the integration of community stories in the way the school approached teaching and learning. As we

evaluated our work, we applied a critical lens and resolved to reimagine how we approached college preparation for students at E-E High. Transforming curricular and pedagogical approaches were important reasons for the change, but another factor was that we had created no plan in our college preparatory program for bringing our students back home after they completed college, especially those who wanted to return. We were participating in the ubiquitous rural “brain drain,” the persistent phenomenon that plagues rural communities across the world (Flora et al. 1992; Keillor 2004).

At that point we formalized the work under the banner of the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development. The college preparation morphed into a more comprehensive teaching and learning approach that focused on identity formation, youth leadership, and community development. All this would define our new college preparation efforts. Almost 30 years after the E-E High School Walkout, and more than a decade since we began to imagine how we could approach education differently, we officially opened the door to the Llano Grande Center in the summer of 1997 at E-E High. Carmen walked through the door that same year, her freshman year in high school.

Issues on the Emerging Methodology

We employed qualitative research approaches as we followed Carmen through her school years and as her life mirrored the development of the Llano Grande Center. We collected data through ethnographic research, interviews, oral history, and a sustained dialogue with Carmen during the past ten years. Additional data was collected through interviews with E-E High School teachers, Llano Grande Center staff members, students, and other community members. We use the research process as an opportunity to teach and learn as we look to create new knowledge, a cornerstone of critical pedagogy (Greene 1986, 1995). This description would place our work under the critical ethnography camp, but that would be a simplistic description. An inherent complexity is built in when we pose the question: how does research change when the observed becomes part of the observing process? This question is central to the method; the authors of this text are merely weavers of a story that has unfolded with them in the middle, although realized as well through the labor of numerous community partners. We use the reflective process as a strategy for putting ourselves in the middle of the text, which we have done together since the early 1990s. The main data provided here originate from the dialogical process we had engaged in with Carmen, and continue to do so with others, and with the ecology (Keiny 2002). Like Carmen, we are also defined by the work.

This methodology must purposefully depart from the traditional modality if we are to understand it as an activist methodology. Margaret Wheatley aptly quotes Albert Einstein, who said, “The problems of today will not be solved with the same consciousness that created them” (2006:5). Heeding that wisdom, we must employ a different way of thinking, one that is more consistent with the spirit and realities of the community in which we live, work, and research (Smith 1999). Our task is to do more than construct a different theory of practice. We must also rupture the traditional paradigms and use methods as an instrument for change (Kuhn 1970). In rupturing the paradigmatic membrane through research and inquiry, we can deconstruct the tools–methods that have historically kept knowledge and power for the

privileged; at this juncture, we can also begin to rebuild. In Smith's nomenclature, we decolonize the research process to respond to the strengths and particular needs of the local community. This disruption of the traditional paradigm creates space for new voices to surface and to contribute to a new method for documentation and knowledge creation.

Thus, as the observed has become part of the observing process, we use a different ontological reality that is congruent with the local ecology and its people yet distant enough where we can be reflective (Foley 2002) and open to disrupting the process when necessary. We use the reflective process as a strategy for putting ourselves in the middle of the text, which is important for a number of reasons. The first is that we have disrupted the traditional power dynamics that researchers bring to marginalized communities. The values of trust, respect, honesty, and dignity have informed the work we have been doing collaboratively since the early 1990s. In a traditional research methods course this approach could be discounted as potentially bias, for it could contaminate the data. On the other hand, we believe our long-lasting and deep relationships with the community validate the data, which are triangulated by the longevity of the work and the products we see in the people and our community (Guajardo and Guajardo 2002, 2004). As activist academics and community developers, we cannot simply follow the "dollars" or the most recent "faddish" research agenda. What makes activist research work is a sustained commitment to the work, where you can witness changes in people, in families, in institutions.

We have dedicated our time and careers to this work: it has become a way of life for us, for many of our research collaborators, and for the organization through which we formalize our work. We find power in this way of life, in the relationships and the commitments we have made to community (Stringer 2006). The realization of this relational power (Loomer 1976) allows us to negotiate the issues of hegemony (Gramsci 1971). We see research as one of the historical hegemonic structures utilized to reproduce the societal inequality, but we understand that we can turn that power around, particularly because of the relationships we have developed through the past generation of work as educators and researchers in this one community (Villenas 1996). We find that the research enterprise affords us the opportunity to disrupt the traditional discursive regimes and reclaim the agency that is part of our birthright in this country, the right to be active citizens and the right to receive a quality education.

A second reason for putting ourselves in the middle of the text and work is that we role model the inquiry process as an instrument for change. This is important for educational leaders, teachers, students, and community partners as they become researchers in their own right, much like Carmen has become an activist-researcher. As we use the research process to author ourselves, we see young people in the community learning these skills. The ability to author oneself is a complex process that yields great power for our partners. As youth become researchers and creators of knowledge, they then gain richer learning experiences, and they generate power as they position themselves for life after high school. When they apply to college, for example, they apply as experienced community-based researchers who, as in the case of Carmen, play important roles as agents for social and community change. Because of this, we have seen colleges and universities across the country show a strong desire to recruit our students.

The activist methodology that emerges from our work is rooted in place, built on relationships, and sustained over a period of time. It cannot be relegated to one

section of the document, for in an ethnographic form of “thick descriptions” (Geertz 1973) we will paint the picture of Carmen, our community, and ourselves in the text. The work has been profoundly transformational. We dare not describe it as an initiative, project, or program; instead, it has become a way of life, having spanned now a generation. We see the need for researchers to revisit their unit of analysis from looking at school to looking at communities. As participant-researchers and agents for school and community change, we view our experience and work as a process of reculturalization, rather than traditional school reform (Cuban 1990). It is about culture, politics, and building power within the context of a community’s life and narrative. It is about honoring people’s dignity, and about building hope for children and families. That is our brand of school reform.

Story as Data: A Ninth-Grade Experience

Carmen recalls a classroom experience when she was a freshman in high school. The class was engrossed in an emotional discussion over a piece of literature. “I remember,” she said, “that two girls in my class were going back and forth, and back and forth, arguing about a reading selection. I don’t recall the specific details of the debate, but what I do remember is that it climaxed when Lila, one of the students, pounded her fist on her desk and said, ‘No, that’s not what my grandmother meant in that paragraph.’” That day, students were reading a narrative that Lila and some of her classmates had published in a journal entirely produced by students and their teachers, and that featured the voices of local elders. In this journal, the elders functioned as authors who narrated their life histories, and who shared stories of community history. “One day,” Carmen recalled, “we’d read Mark Twain or William Faulkner, or some other traditional American author, and the next we’d read something that meant something to us personally, something we could connect with. It was a rich experience because we didn’t just study our community stories, we also produced our own literature.”

On Carmen’s Training

The ongoing skill-development work in which Carmen and her classmates engaged included learning the technological skills of how to capture stories, as well as the rules of ethnographic, life history, and oral history research (see Figure 1). Since the mid 1990s, E-E students began to read works such as Paredes’s *With His Pistol in His Hand* (1958), other border histories, resistance narratives, and selected ethnographic studies. From the readings they learned about theories, literary forms, and symbols, but from meeting with authors such as Paredes, they learned about the passion and conviction a researcher can bring to the work. Carmen recalls the day when don Américo visited E-E High in 1998. “He was so generous with his time,” she said. “He signed our *Pistol* books, and he talked about the importance of knowing ourselves and our history. Students in the school listened to him with great respect.” Carmen and her classmates also studied George Spindler and Louise Spindler (2000) to learn the process of ethnography. “Roger Harker” (1997b) and “Beth Anne” (1997a) became part of the discourse in English, history, and research methods courses. When Llano Grande brought George Spindler to E-E High early in 2002, students sat him down and peppered the “father of education anthropology” with questions on his life,

Figure 1.
From left to right: George Spindler, Ray McDermott, Doug Foley, Henry Trueba, Ardie Trueba, and Phillip Trueba. Elsa, Texas, 2002.

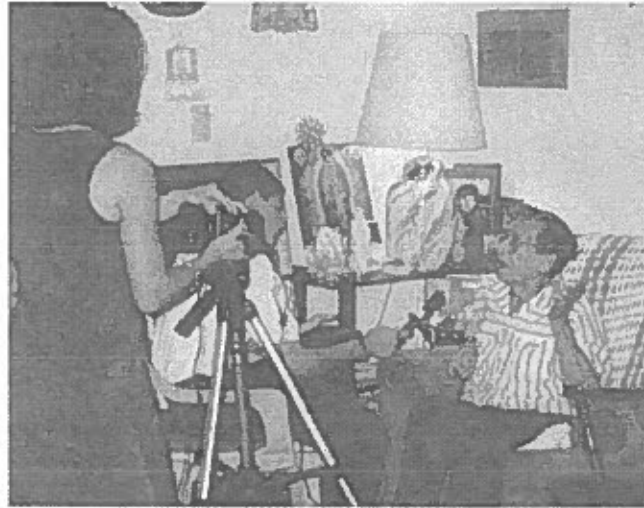


his education, his interviewing techniques, and on "Roger Harker." Like don Américo, Spindler was a big hit at E-E High.

Critical perspectives are also an integral part of the curriculum as students and teachers discuss social, political, and institutional inequities as they read Freire. Students also discuss critical perspectives when they study culturally relevant pedagogy, as introduced by Ladson-Billings (1995), and as Guajardo and Guajardo (2002, 2004) describe the local context. Henry Trueba's work also became part of the literature that guided the research work. Henry Trueba's (1999) interpretation of Vygotsky and the subsequent pedagogy of hope especially inspire students, many who felt increasingly hopeful about the world of possibilities for themselves, their families, and their communities. Much of this sense of hope was built through the process of reading, research, and creation of new knowledge. Trueba's influence on the Llano Grande Center and E-E High was more profound because he actually relocated physically to Elsa, Texas, and became an integral part of the work of Llano Grande between 2000 and 2004.

Through these readings, Carmen and her classmates learned research skills such as interviewing, observing, and analyzing data; and they learned about critical ethnography and pedagogy as well. With that background, students identified potential interviewees who were family members, neighbors, or someone else from the community who simply had interesting stories to tell (see Figure 2). Typically, students worked in teams of three or four, and together prepared the logistics of when and where interviews would occur; on occasion, interviewees traveled to the school, while other times student interviewers visited the home of elders to conduct an interview or a series of interviews. Equipped with cameras, microphones, tripods, and pads and

Figure 2.
Llano Grande students interview a local elder. Elsa, Texas, 1999.



pencils, student researchers collected data while they also deepened relationships with elders and their community neighbors.

After the interview process, students then transcribed the oral histories by using transcribing machines. "We learned how to become good listeners," said Carmen, "and we learned much more from listening to the stories over and over again, because we had to rewind over and over, to get the transcription right." Under the direction of skilled teachers, students then converted transcribed interviews into narratives that were subsequently laid out through desktop publishing software. Published in the local Llano Grande Journal, the narratives and scanned images, which included photographs or other historical documents, became part of the official content to be read and studied by local students. "The stories contained great data," Carmen explains, "but the process of creating the literature was much more powerful" (Delgado-Gaitan 2004; Trueba 2004).

A Tenth-Grade Story: Authoring the Self

Just as students work as researchers and creators of knowledge, essentially as producers of the literature they study, they also emerge as storytellers, particularly when they themselves become the subjects of oral histories. A typical scenario has a student interviewer sitting across from a student interviewee for the purpose of conducting an oral history interview. Carmen conducted her share of interviews, and she was the subject of one as well. She describes her oral history as the time when she was able to explore her immigrant narrative. "When I was encouraged to reflect on my immigrant experience, I slowly began to understand that my story was not something to be ashamed of," she said. "To the contrary, I began to feel proud of my story and didn't mind sharing very emotional things that I went through."

Carmen saw the power of creating new knowledge during her ninth-grade year, and in the tenth grade she began to realize the power in her own story. "I remember telling the story," she said, "of my father's Peruvian ancestry, and of how he came to Mexico to join the circus, and of how my mother met him at the circus. That's where I was born, in the circus. That's the beginning of my story." And she was able to explore it as part of her class assignment at E-E High.

11th-Grade Stories: Carmen as Activist-Researcher

Carmen's first two years in high school helped her find her story; build a strong sense of identity; and develop deep relationships with family members, teachers, classmates, and others in the community. Her junior year in high school moved the focus of her work from personal to community. Early during the academic year, several classes at the school engaged in a community-based research project that would be developed and implemented collaboratively between students and teachers; the students were the lead data collectors. The research methodology was informed by principles taken from action research, community change models, and asset-based community development work. The youth-led research team pursued three goals: (1) students would learn basic action research skills, (2) the research team would identify assets extant within the community, and (3) a plan of action based on the research findings would be generated.

Carmen quickly emerged as an essential part of the research team that conducted interviews, studied public records, took ethnographic notes on observed behavior, and even walked door to door in an effort to map comprehensively the assets in the community. In a recent dialogue in which she reflected on that research process, Carmen recalled the rationale for this research work when she said, "We wanted to see if through research we could get a different view of our town, different from what the media and the government always put out." Indeed, the research purpose intentionally challenged the deficit-driven (Valencia 1997) interpretations of this rural community. As Carmen reiterated, "The students knew our community was a good place, but we wanted to see if we could prove it through this research."

After months of honing their research skills, conducting community walks, and collecting a wide range of data, the young researchers began data analysis by using several software packages, including Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings were compelling. "We knew," recalled Carmen, "that we didn't have a lot of industry, tourism, and those kinds of traditional community assets." But as they observed the data, the students found that local residents viewed the concept of assets differently. Carmen said, "They talked about their stories as they lived them in the community . . . with their kids, at the school, and with other *familiares y con los compadres y las comadres*." The concept of story—personal and community—emerged as one of the most important assets for people in the town. Carmen then described the second greatest asset as "the language people used to tell their stories: they mostly told stories in Spanish, especially the elders." Contrary to the popular perception that people from this rural, South Texas community were somehow impoverished because a large number of residents did not know English, the research data demonstrated a radically different perspective. Because many locals were fluent in Spanish, that capacity was viewed as an asset (Gonzalez et al. 2005; Guajardo and Guajardo 2002).

"But what do you do with story and Spanish?" asked Carmen rhetorically. "Well, we decided to do strategic planning around those assets, and today we know that we've created a lot of jobs through our Spanish-Language Immersion Institute and our Digital Storytelling workshops." Carmen and four of her classmates, in fact, created the Spanish Institute as an economic enterprise built on the assets of the local people. After the data collection phase, the young researchers-entrepreneurs collaborated with teachers to draft a language immersion concept, which they forwarded to a national foundation that awarded them a \$50,000 grant to launch the initiative. For the next several years, the community hosted paying customers who traveled to South Texas from places as far as New York, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, and California for the purpose of immersing themselves in the Spanish language: in South Texas. Monolingual Spanish-speaking elders worked as hosts to visiting students who studied Spanish through a formal curriculum during the day; the students then spent evenings and weekends learning through a living curriculum. Carmen and her classmates worked as teachers during the day while elders functioned in similar roles after school hours. And everybody got paid. "That's how I made money to pay for my freshman year in college," Carmen recalls, "and it created employment for many other youths and people from the community . . . who otherwise would probably not have had jobs during the summer."

How to conceptualize the concept of story as an asset and to capitalize on it for community or economic development was far more complex than building a language institute. But the question was worth posing: how can we use story, an important community asset, for greater teaching and learning in the schools, and to build power in the schools and in the community? Since we conducted the asset-mapping research, we have worked diligently to integrate the concept of story as a central part of curricula at all grade levels. During the past decade, just about every elementary student has been assigned the task of collecting stories of their families, whether that be through oral histories, family interviews, family album studies, genealogy assignments, and so on. Middle and high school students similarly find curricula that require students to engage family members and others from the community to collect, study, analyze, and celebrate community stories. The Llano Grande Center has also led the effort to position story as the most important component of the college preparation and application process at E-E High, as well as in numerous other high schools in the region and in other parts of the country. "I have trained teachers, high school counselors, and students on how to build students' stories to gain a competitive advantage for college admissions," said Carmen. To be sure, Carmen has traveled to many places in this country to share with others how she has used her story to gain opportunity and to generate personal power.

Llano Grande has additionally capitalized on story as asset by creating a Digital Storytelling training program primarily to teach students, teachers, and community workers on the craft of producing stories through digital media. During the past five years, the center has trained hundreds of students and others in schools in South Texas, in more than 17 other states, and in several other countries. Carmen, for example, has traveled to New Zealand, Peru, Mexico, and Canada to assist others in understanding how to use personal, organizational, and community stories to build power. "The concept of story resonates with many people, especially people from marginalized communities," said Carmen, as she reflected on her travels as an educator. "Interestingly," Carmen continued, "the stories I have learned through the

travels I have taken have been important not just for me but also for my family, and even my community . . . it's how we've broken the isolation." Like Carmen, dozens of other Llano Grande youth have traveled across the world to share stories, to learn stories, and to bring those stories back. The experience has had a profound impact on the future of this rural community that for many years appeared isolated, insulated, and marginalized.

The asset-mapping exercise and the larger community-based research work that Carmen was involved in yielded unprecedented results. It even inspired the local congressman to look differently at how he approached assets, data, and community and economic development. A favorite story Carmen likes to tell is when the congressman took the research report that identified community assets, and then used it to create a regional economic development board and a regional economic development plan. "Now we've gotten more than two million dollars in federal dollars to improve our community, and the plan to do that is the plan we created," Carmen said as she beamed with the pride of a young activist-researcher.

A 12th-Grade Story: Carmen as Policy Activist

When Carmen began her senior year in high school, she and her family had thus waited more than four years for notice from the Immigration and Naturalization Service to determine if the family could gain legal residency in the United States. Like dozens of her classmates, Carmen was an undocumented student who was also close to graduating from high school. "I was at a loss," she recalls, "because I didn't know if I could go to college because of my residency." At the time, undocumented high school graduates in Texas were not allowed in Texas public universities unless they applied to college as international students, but that was not a palatable option for Carmen: too costly and too complicated. "We addressed this issue," said Carmen, "just like we addressed the local park renovation, and the way we approached the brown field issue in Elsa; we addressed it through research."

The problem was clear: undocumented students had little or no opportunity to attend college after high school. The question was clear, too: through research, how can Carmen and others in our school and community participate in changing this reality? The realities dictated the question, and the relationships between students, their families, and Llano Grande staffers allowed the question to emerge. Conditions and relationships were such that research questions emerged out of those realities. Readings for this research assignment further enhanced student understanding of the issue. One particularly useful text was *Immigrant Voices*, which was hot off the press at the time (Trueba and Bartolome 2000). Students and teachers engaged in conversations specific to critical pedagogy (McLaren 2000), and read stories of children from other parts of the country who had immigrant experiences very similar to theirs (Brueggemann 1987). The experience of reading and studying *Immigrant Voices* was especially profound because Henry Trueba, the editor and an author of the book, facilitated several class discussions. "El profesor Trueba helped us understand the issue better, simply because of his understanding of the big picture, but also how he talked about the organization of data, and about developing arguments with the data," said Carmen.

"We critiqued the law, the institutions, and the values that pushed people to create and maintain those laws," recalled Carmen, "and then we planned for how we could inform others of the injustices imbedded in that." Students like Carmen were moved

to view the immigration issues through critical perspectives, clearly, but they were also moved to act for change. Early in the research process, one of the teachers read a press release indicating that a state legislator from an urban area in Texas had drafted legislation that would allow undocumented students to attend public universities in the state if those students graduated from high school and if their families were in the process of applying for legal residency through the Immigration and Naturalization Service. "When we found out about HB 1403," Carmen recalled, "we were ready to act." After days of phone calls and e-mails, the research team learned of the status of the pending legislation and quickly developed a plan of action. Carmen and other undocumented students worked with teachers and Llano Grande staff members to prepare testimonials to present to a legislative committee that would convene in Austin. Months after the team first began to understand the issue, and a few weeks after learning of the legislation, a team of researchers traveled to Austin to tell their stories. Carmen and four of her classmates stood in a large chamber in the Texas Capitol and delivered their testimonials in front of legislators, the media, and others. Within weeks after their testimonials, the legislature voted to approve House Bill 1403. The next fall, Carmen and her classmates enrolled in college.

Current Challenges to the Work

Unfortunately, the kind of education Carmen and her classmates experienced is not the norm in public schools across this country, especially in poor and historically marginalized communities. Even at E-E High School, where the work enjoyed significant support during the past dozen years, this teaching and learning approach is still not in the mainstream of school life. More than 1,500 students are enrolled at E-E High, but only about 200 are actively involved in place-based work. Several factors explain why more students are not involved in this process. One is that many teachers are not prepared to engage in this work because they did not experience it while they were in school, and, as a current E-E High teacher said in a recent interview, "There's really no frame of reference for many of us who haven't done this sort of teaching." Another factor that teachers cite is that it is hard to change the way they prepare to teach and the way they conduct the actual teaching. Students support this notion as well. Carmen commented on this point by saying, "It's too much to change how you teach . . . to go from feeding students information so they can memorize it and spit it back on a test, to doing community research, working on student identity formation, oral histories. . . . Unless they're really well trained, it's very hard for teachers to change how they do things." Moving away from what Martin Haberman (1991) calls pedagogy of poverty to what Freire calls "pedagogy of liberation" is an insurmountable challenge for many teachers, but "they can change," Carmen said, "if they are willing to commit to certain practices and a new way of thinking."

Although the Llano Grande Center routinely conducts teacher training on the work Carmen describes, the preponderance of resources that schools allot for teacher training and professional development is typically reserved for workshops to help raise state-mandated test scores. As one local principal stated, "Really, we're measured by one thing and one thing only—test scores. So, we have to pump all available resources into test prep." It has become the new reality in public schools across the country: schools have become testing factories (McNeil 2001; Nichols and Berliner 2007; Valenzuela 2005; Wood 2004). While Llano Grande work focuses on deep

engagement between students and the subject matter, schools in the current era of accountability have become engulfed in what Padilla calls a "culture of measurement," rather than a "culture of engagement" (Padilla 2005). The brand of professional development for teachers that Llano Grande offers, while engaging, becomes low priority for public schools, and some school leaders are quite candid about it. "The work Llano Grande kids do is exciting, but it needs to be more focused on strategies that help kids do well according to the state's accountability system; that's what really counts," said a local assistant principal in a recent conversation. In this context, a significant obstacle is educational policy, and how that policy influences educational leaders' decisions regarding allocation of resources, including teacher training (Valenzuela 1999, 2005).

In our context we have seen change occur most profoundly after institutional cultures are transformed and reculturalized. Llano Grande has partnered with the local school district because the school building is the center of school life and the nexus of where change will occur in this rural community. As change occurs, the institution of the school can be thrown off its equilibrium, and we believe that in this context we can build community, as we simultaneously create the conditions to usher in change. The change we have precipitated locally has been grounded within a pedagogical and community building framework. It is more effective to make change when people understand and respect each other than when they live in a state of anxiety. "Though my mother gets excited about the changes in my life, she also gets agitated because my sister and I are changing in ways she never imagined," said Carmen, whose change can be seen as radical. "A lot of this is not safe," she said, "challenging your assumptions, challenging other's way of thinking, being challenged by others; most people don't want to change. . . . It can be scary."

We must be patient with people, respect them, and "meet them where they are," as Myles Horton (Adams and Horton 1975) professed. We see this change as a long, sustained effort where the work must focus on both micro- and macrolevels (Guajardo and Guajardo 2004); we work for local change, but a change that is couched in broader social, cultural, and economic contexts. Although most schools, including the ones we work in, are driven by standards and values from outside, the Llano Grande Center is an organic organization that operates on a horizontal structure and creates spaces to maximize democratic participation. Although this organizational culture often clashes with school culture, we find that students, parents, and even school officials are energized by the homegrown quality of the work. Most importantly, the community appreciates the commitment to a long and sustained effort; the long-term approach is the most effective way we know through which we can build a sense of hope for children, families, and the community at large. Carmen's family is representative of this. "My little brothers know, without hesitation, that they will go to college and have good lives," Carmen said, "and I believe it's because of the modeling my sister and I have shown them."

Emerging Theory

In Meteor Blades (2007), Jim Cummins claims that privileged children in affluent schools typically receive instruction that is grounded and informed by social constructivism, while students in poor schools get instruction informed by behavioral science. To change this kind of educational behavior, we follow a theoretical construct

informed by constructivist principles, critical pedagogy, and practices useful for building strong cultural identity. The social constructivist movement, Vygotsky's work in particular, gives us a useful vehicle for viewing local knowledge and context-place as assets in the learning process. The "zone of proximal development" is congruent with the pedagogy of place we employ as part of the Llano Grande curriculum. Introducing global concepts and viewing them through local lenses center teaching and learning in a more meaningful and concrete manner, and it gives students and teachers the power to see themselves not as consumers of information and data but, rather, as researchers and creators of knowledge. The community becomes the classroom. In addition, we empower ourselves to frame research questions, to develop research protocols and create a plan of action to research the local park or investigate the brown field disaster left behind by the defunct Red Barn Chemical company or prepare to facilitate the local school board debates. The power of students and teachers as active participants in their learning and in the knowledge creation process has yielded a sense of ownership. If the negative conditions were socially constructed, then we too can deconstruct and reconstruct a vision and a positive reality based on community assets.

This dynamic curriculum that begins with place and is informed by the local context and condition has helped students learn about themselves, their history, and their ecology. This process has become counter hegemonic in nature. Since the introduction of the Common Schools Movement, a primary role of the schooling process has been to assimilate students, yet the work at Llano Grande has created the space for youth to learn about themselves, their history, and their culture. This process is not an ideological position; it is a process that helps youth and their families develop skills and create opportunities. It is a process that nurtures mentoring relationships between youth and adults. In short, the Llano Grande Center facilitates the process for youths and adults to author themselves (Holland et al. 1998). Holland and others use the combination of Vygotsky's developmental process and Bahktin's dialogical construction of symbols and their meaning to help develop the individual so that they can author their own identity. When youth arrive at a level of comfort with who they are, they become more resilient as actors in life. "I survived school because I had a firm sense of myself, of who I was, of my personal identity," Carmen said, when she reflected on how she responded to stressful times while in high school and while in college. In an academic context, Carmen said, "I was a better researcher as well, more resilient, like Trueba says, largely because I was comfortable with myself and who I was when I was in graduate school."

Critical pedagogy has informed, and continues to inform, the work of the Llano Grande Center by helping youth and staff create the space needed to become researchers and creators of knowledge, and it inspires teaching and learning practices that identify injustices in different segments of social, economic, and institutional life. This theoretical premise informs youth and adults about their history through oral histories, life histories, ethnographies, genealogies, and storytelling sessions. Because much of this research focuses on issues of identity, both individual and collective, an important product of the work is identity formation. In the two years that Trueba lived in South Texas he engaged us in countless conversations and was wont to paraphrase Freire by saying, "Men and women who do not know their place in history will never understand their role in society." We took this Trueba-Freire wisdom seriously and geared much of our work away from teaching and learning

practices based on the traditional banking system that nurtures passivity (Freire 2000) and worked toward a liberating type of instruction in which students study their own story and the history and condition of their community. This practice builds student identity and allows them to gain ownership over their learning.

Freire's counter to the banking approach, the use of a "problem posing" method, presents itself as a radically different way of teaching and learning, but it is the method that students in communities such as ours, and other rural and isolated places need for the purposes of individual and community change. "Students," said Freire, "as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge" (Freire 2000:62). Freirian thought, however, is marginal at best, in how public schools pursue their purpose of educating children in this country. It was no different at E-E High, since the school district's inception in the early 1930s, and the values that gave birth to local public schooling persisted late into the century. "When I went to school in the 1940s and '50s, we talked about the classics, about mainstream history, science, and math," recalled one community elder. During the early to mid century, the education of Mexican American children, both during the age of segregation and after *Brown vs. the Board of Education* in 1954, focused on Americanizing them through intense instruction in the culture and language of the dominant society (González 1998; Montejano 1987; San Miguel 1987). Years after desegregation, similar processes persisted. Rarely, however, were children required to think about issues in their community as part of the instructional process. "We were seldom presented with the problems of our hometown," said one local teacher, who attended local schools in the 1960s and 1970s. There was no sense of urgency to inspire students to become active agents of change, nor was there evidence that the public school had a role in creating that change. Schools operated on the banking concept and functioned to reproduce the values and tenets of the dominant culture; schooling became an enterprise that perpetuated poverty and imprisoned youths to be little more than receptors of knowledge. Gaining a social consciousness or transforming community was not a priority for the local public schools. To the contrary, they became critical to the Llano Grande Center, when we founded it about a generation ago.

Closing Reflections

Two years after HB 1403 passed, Carmen and her family gained legal residency status, and with that she then transferred from a Texas public university to a private college on the west coast, where she earned an undergraduate degree. She has since obtained a master's degree from an institution in the Midwest, and her next stop is a doctoral program in the Northeast. When she completes a Ph.D., she will be (approximately) the tenth alumnus from E-E High and the Llano Grande Center during the time of our work, each of those having participated in activist community-based research either as a student, a teacher, or a school administrator in this community. During the same time period, at least two-dozen others have earned master's degrees, and many others undergraduate degrees. A sampling of theses and dissertation titles reflects the close connection and commitment to community: "Narratives of Transformation," "Education for Leadership Development," and "Ethnic Resistance in a Mexican American Community." This kind of sustained pedagogy and activist research has inspired many young people to care about their story, their schools, and

their community. Carmen's own master's thesis, "The Psychological Impact of Immigration on Mexican Immigrant Children in Rural South Texas Schools," reflects a commitment to her own story, as well as others with similar experiences. Without question, the community views itself radically differently today, than it did a generation ago. We understand ourselves better; we know the history more clearly; and we're engaging in teaching and learning processes that build on the strengths and energies of local people, rather than focusing on the deficiencies and/or limitations.

We reject deficit thinking as a model through which to approach education (Valencia 1997); it does not move us forward in building the self-esteem of children, families, schools, or the community at large. We understand that unemployment rates in the area still hover around 20 percent, but we also recall that number at 32 percent in the late 1980s and early 1990s. On the other hand, population statistics show that high school diplomas have risen from 48% for those who attended E-E schools in the 1970s and early 1980s to 70% for those graduating from E-E High in the 1990s and into the new millennium (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). One of the most significant indicators is that local high school students are going to college at twice the rate as they were a generation ago. As is the case with school reform and community change, results emerge at a slow and deliberate pace. Change requires sustained work, long-term commitment, and wide-ranging support. We have sustained the work through the waves of young people who come in and out of the Llano Grande Center to engage in one research project or another; we have found the long-term commitment in teachers, parents, and others who work in community organizations; and we have found support from locals, as well as from partners from across the country: other students, educators, foundation program directors, and cultural workers in nonprofit organizations.

"I have been involved in this work for half of my life. I love my family, and I love the idea of knowing my community, and the idea of being able to change it through research," Carmen said. Legions of others have similarly found strength in the power of the idea, the idea that through a community-based education approach that facilitates the process for engaging in meaningful work, building strong relationships, and constructing a sense of identity, we can transform ourselves and our communities, and build hope for our children and the world they will inherit.

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Note

Acknowledgments. We owe a debt of gratitude to the elders in our community—those who fueled the flames of hope for generations, those who picked the crops, watered the plants,

swept the floors, raised the families, and told the stories that inspire our work. We thank our parents, brothers, wives, and children for their unconditional support. We thank the staff and cultural workers of the Llano Grande Center; they are the frontline cultural workers who make magic happen every day as they work with youth, teachers, and parents. Most importantly, we thank the fearless youth who fight daily to keep their dignity and identity in spite of the constant institutional challenges they face. Their spirit gives us hope!

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International New York Times

<http://nyti.ms/1zCeqtR>

The Opinion Pages | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Bilingual Nationhood, Canadian-Style

By CHRYSTIA FREELAND DEC. 25, 2014

TORONTO — AS the United States gears up for a political brawl over immigration next year, one of the concerns shaping the debate will be the fear that English-speaking Americans will be culturally and linguistically overwhelmed by newcomers, many of them Spanish-speaking.

An example of what is in store was the autumn cyberspat between the Telemundo anchor and MSNBC host José Díaz-Balart and the talk radio host Laura Ingraham, who was annoyed because Mr. Díaz-Balart had pronounced a Hispanic name with the correct accent and conducted a bilingual interview in too “herky-jerky” a manner.

For me, reading about the contretemps in the lobby of Canada’s House of Commons was a moment of cognitive dissonance. In our Parliament, Anglophone members speak terrible French every day. Our accents are so bad that sometimes our Francophone colleagues can’t quite hide their winces.

This butchering of Flaubert’s native tongue is the foundation of a larger accommodation that Canada, and in particular English-speaking Canada, has made with a world in which our language may be dominant, but isn’t alone. We are far from perfect — our failings are particularly egregious in our treatment of our aboriginal people — but when it comes to living in a multilingual, multicultural world, we get a lot right.

“Multiculturalism isn’t just about statistics, it is about attitude. It is about seeing diversity as strength,” Henry Kim, the director of Toronto’s dazzling new Aga Khan Museum, one of the world’s finest collections of Islamic art, told me. “Canadians believe that blending makes you better and stronger.”

Mr. Kim is a Chicago-born Korean-American. He doesn’t speak Korean, and

his mother baked apple pie “badly.” Mr. Kim suggests that his homeland is still uneasy about incoming cultures: “Canada has a minister of multiculturalism. Can you imagine that in Washington?”

One of Mr. Kim’s favorite examples of Canada’s embrace of diversity is “Little Mosque on the Prairie,” a sitcom about exactly that. Mine is a “social experiment” staged in Hamilton, a working-class city southwest of Toronto, after the death of its newly and tragically famous son, Nathan Cirillo, the reservist who was shot in Ottawa in October by a gunman who had expressed sympathy with radical Islam.

One actor stood at a bus stop in traditional Muslim dress. The other loudly argued that the Muslim could be a terrorist and tried to stop him from boarding the bus. Over and over, bystanders defended the Muslim-looking man. The experiment finally had to be stopped when the actor playing a bigot was punched by an offended local.

That’s hard to beat as an advertisement for healthy multiculturalism. One reason for rejecting a mosaic in favor of assimilation is the fear of the opposite outcome, that immigrant communities that hang on too tightly to their original language and culture will fail to integrate into the larger society.

But research shows that immigrant children raised in an environment that values the language of their parents actually learn English more quickly and are more academically successful. Part of it is psychological. Multicultural societies make immigrant children feel accepted in their own right.

The advantages of bilingualism seem to be neurological, too. We are wired to learn languages, and the more languages we speak, the more networks our brains develop.

I suspect the greater, unspoken, concern of Anglophones is that we will be at a disadvantage in a society where everyone else is bilingual. I get it. I feel that pang every week when I stumble through my French class, and then listen to the perfect French and English of my native Francophone colleagues.

The world’s rich countries are falling into two camps: those that are able to attract and welcome immigrants and those that are not. Western industrial societies like Japan and parts of Europe that are unwilling to accept newcomers, and to allow themselves to be transformed by those immigrants, are destined to

demographic and economic decline.

Citing a number of recent studies that show a connection between immigration, diversity and entrepreneurship, Andrés Rodríguez-Pose and Daniel Hardy of the London School of Economics recently warned that this year's hard anti-immigrant turn in Britain would have negative consequences: "Recent legislation by the U.K. Home Office to restrict migration is likely to lead to a serious dent in entrepreneurship, affecting in turn the potential for employment generation and economic growth."

Multiculturalism and bilingualism are hard. A couple of weeks ago, an M.P. from Quebec chastised the Canadian government for using the verb "captiver" (to captivate) on its Twitter account instead of the correct "capter" (to capture), and accused the Twitter-feeder of mechanically translating jokes word-for-word from English. Quelle horreur!

His insistence on linguistic precision points to the real challenge of a bilingual or multicultural society in which one language and culture is dominant: keeping the minority cultures from vanishing. Anglophones on our shared continent shouldn't worry that our children will speak Spanish or French. We should be afraid that they won't.

Chrystia Freeland is a Liberal member of the Canadian Parliament.

A version of this op-ed appears in print on December 26, 2014, on page A27 of the New York edition with the headline: Bilingual Nationhood, Canadian-Style.

Sending kids of color to the classrooms of teachers of color for timeouts on a continual basis is hurting everyone, including the teachers who send them away. As a black, female, no-nonsense middle school teacher, dating back to the days of my student teaching, white teachers in the building have asked if I wanted to be in on a “difficult” phone call, if I would “talk” to a black boy who was “acting out” or a black girl who “needed a mentor.” I’ve gotten used to responding with professional, helpful words, though at times I’d like to choose otherwise: “Baby Boy spends more time in your class than anywhere else. He is looking for praise and mentorship from you. It’s phony coming from me. You can call home. His mother doesn’t want him acting up, but she wants you to do *your* job too. So, sorry—no, he cannot come to me for timeout.”

Dear White Teacher. . .

BY CHRYSANTHIUS LATHAN

Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate when teachers come to me for advice and understanding regarding students and families of color, but using me solely for repeat timeouts and phone calls does not help anyone involved.

A couple of Januaries ago, I was called into my building administrator’s office. I had assumed that I would be asked to do something, write something, lead something. Instead, I was informed that my child’s teacher had written her a referral.

I spent six years teaching at the same school that my children attended, which also happened to be statistically the blackest school in the city. The school was full of amazing, unique educators who had a good grasp on cultural competence. My child’s teacher was a white man who taught on the same floor as I did. I sat with this man through many good and not-so-good staff meetings and trainings. He asked me for writing lessons, which I shared. So how is it that I could share my expertise with him and simultaneously

have no idea that my child was having trouble behaving herself in class—until it was crammed into one discipline referral at the end of the fifth month of school? The discipline referral went nowhere, but the confusion remained. I confronted her teacher to clear it up. “Why did you not tell me anything if she’d been doing this since September?”

I was met with a wheelbarrow full of excuses. “I don’t want to interrupt your teaching or use you as a crutch,” he said.

“Interrupt my *life*? That’s my child.”

It was my suspicion that his fear of the situation crippled his feet and his dialing fingers, just as fear has defeated many well-meaning white teachers of black and brown students. I tell my students, “Don’t go running your mouth unless you have multiple reliable sources on which to draw your conclusion.” So one day I sent out a special focus group invitation to the students who frequented my classroom timeout leather couch. I grabbed the envelope where I had

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collected the students' timeout slips (I claimed to have lost them, but was secretly stockpiling them) and began writing invitations.

While most of the class was snuggled into silent reading and Jake had finally succumbed to the quiet, warm, dark room and put his head down, I scribbled out 13 invitations. One was for Jake, but I'd wake him later. They read:

You're invited

***A big bucket of Red Vines
in exchange for your honest
opinions today at lunch
Use this invitation
as a hall pass
Don't tell other students—
they'll eat up our candy***

Some of these kids were sent by other teachers for a timeout, and some decided to come for their own timeouts; nevertheless, my room was a revolving door with these same students of color, constantly in and out. Some were in my class at least one period a day; others weren't on my class rosters at all. Some were girls, most were boys. All of them were black or brown, except Jake, a white boy who had attended this school since kindergarten and was now in 8th grade.

What I wanted to know from these kids was: What makes my class so different from their other classes? Why do they behave while they're here but misbehave elsewhere, always get busted, and always get sent to me? I knew that the entire middle school team wanted students to be successful. Some can be sarcastic, but I am the queen of sarcasm. Some yell at times, but so do I . . . a little . . . OK, maybe a lot. So what makes Mrs. Lathan's class different? Why were they always circling back to me?

The lunch bell rang and I quickly pushed my class along to get out of the



RICHE POPE

room and get their coats for lunch and recess. I discreetly handed out the invitations to some students. Kids who didn't get one begged to see what they said while I marched the line down to the cafeteria, and drank my soup before I got back upstairs. I set the bucket of licorice in the middle of the hexagonal table, grabbed my flower journal to take notes, and sat. Five minutes later, three kids were escorted in by another teacher, followed by 10 other kids filtering in with their lunches.

I started with my reasoning for asking them to this forum. "Y'all," I said,

"They're scared of us and our parents, too. That's why they don't be calling home. They just send us to you."

"I've been teaching for a while, but not long enough. I come to school to learn too. What I learn from you helps me to be a better teacher, for you and for the next year's class. Most of you are in my class at some point in the day, and a few of you aren't. But you guys always come to me for timeout. Look, I counted your timeout slips—"

"Who has the most?" Deshawn butted in. He had a quick wit, but mine traveled faster than light.

"You," I said, looking over the top of my glasses at him.

The table laughed and grabbed another Red Vine.

"Anyway, I counted your timeout slips. That's why you were invited. And I really need you guys."

"You need us?" Jake asked.

"Yes, Jakey. I need all of you to answer this perplexing question. Right now I'm like the Godzilla meme, with his finger to his brain, thinking, because I can't answer this question: Why y'all always comin' to me for timeout?"

The room fell silent, except for a few munches of licorice.

So far, Maya had sat with her head down, picking at an overcooked grilled

cheese sandwich, silent. This was common for Maya; she rarely spoke to teachers. She came to me for timeout once and I asked her if she was ready to return—and she growled. Today would be different.

"You really want to know the truth, Mrs. Lathan?" she asked, never looking up. "You're not scared."

"Scared of what? Who? Tell me more, Maya."

"Mrs. Lathan, you know they're scared of us and our parents, too. That's why they don't be calling home. They just send us to you."

Maya's words prompted a firestorm of responses, some funny, some serious, coming so fast and hard that finally I had to conduct this small lunch group as a class. "One at a time—raise your hand—I can't write that fast."

"It's because he ain't got no control of the classroom, Mrs. Lathan!"

"Because we can still do our work in here and go back knowing how to avoid getting picked on by the teacher."

"My mom don't like her because she gave me an F without once calling my mom and telling her I wasn't doing my work."

"Because everybody in here knows Mrs. Lathan does not play."

"You talk to us like our moms and aunts; you expect us to do right, and if we don't, you make us tell our parents what we're not doing."

"They send us here when they get tired of us."

"Only certain kids get sent out, for doing the same things white kids do, maybe just a little louder or bolder, so we get caught."

"I think they be watching us as soon as we come in the building."

"You know why, Mrs. Lathan, we ain't

gotta tell you why we always get sent to you for timeout. It's because you're black."

"They don't just send us to you. They send us to the other black teachers and aides too, Mr. Jones, Ms. James . . ."

"You're not scared of us. We're scared of you, though. Just kidding. I mean, scared in a good way. We're scared to disappoint you. We're scared to go into other classes because we know they're gonna start out talking crazy before we even sit down."

Students spoke of my familiar demeanor and tone, my classroom routines, my allowance of personal space when needed, my low tolerance for work avoidance or refusal, my refusal to kick students out but instead expecting them to work hard, my classroom environment of respect for one another, and so on. All of this sounded like what any good teacher would do.

The "it" factor that lingered was fear. There were two types of fear that the students spoke of: the teachers' fear of them and their fear of the teacher.

As an adult and a professional, there were clearly some issues that I dared not discuss with the group of kids. One is the fact that I'm basically doing another adult's job by doing out-of-class disciplinary work. I work hard, but I have a small lazy bone. I don't want to do portions of other people's jobs, as I'm sure no one else wants to do part of mine.

Another issue is that I am teaching students of color how to navigate a classroom with routines and rules centered in ideals of whiteness, where there is only one "right" way to be a successful student: show in ways recognized by white culture that you respect authority, work to a standard, don't challenge, don't make waves, apologize when you do. I question my own ethics every time I tell a student: "I understand you, your teacher may not. That is a reason to follow their rules." And then I push them right back into that room.

The main issue, though, is the time I spend putting out the fires burning in

kids, cooling the burns of the previous classroom mishaps, bandaging them up, and telling them not to play with fire, when I know full well that they aren't playing with fire at all. They are walking into a furnace every time they step into the classroom. That furnace is failure, and it is fueled by fear.

"I don't want to be called racist."

Based on conversations with colleagues and my observations, I think that many whites live in fear of their good faith actions being labeled as racist. Rather than facing that fear and seeing what they can learn about themselves from the process, many white teachers seem to believe that a better alternative would be to pair students with teachers who look and sound like them, or like people in their families, in the name of having a positive role model or mentor. There's no doubt that we need more teachers of color in our

schools, but we also have to deal with the situation that exists today. Many white teachers are discouraged, believing that they are ill-equipped to meet the needs of students of color simply because they don't have the same experiences as them. In response, they freeze.

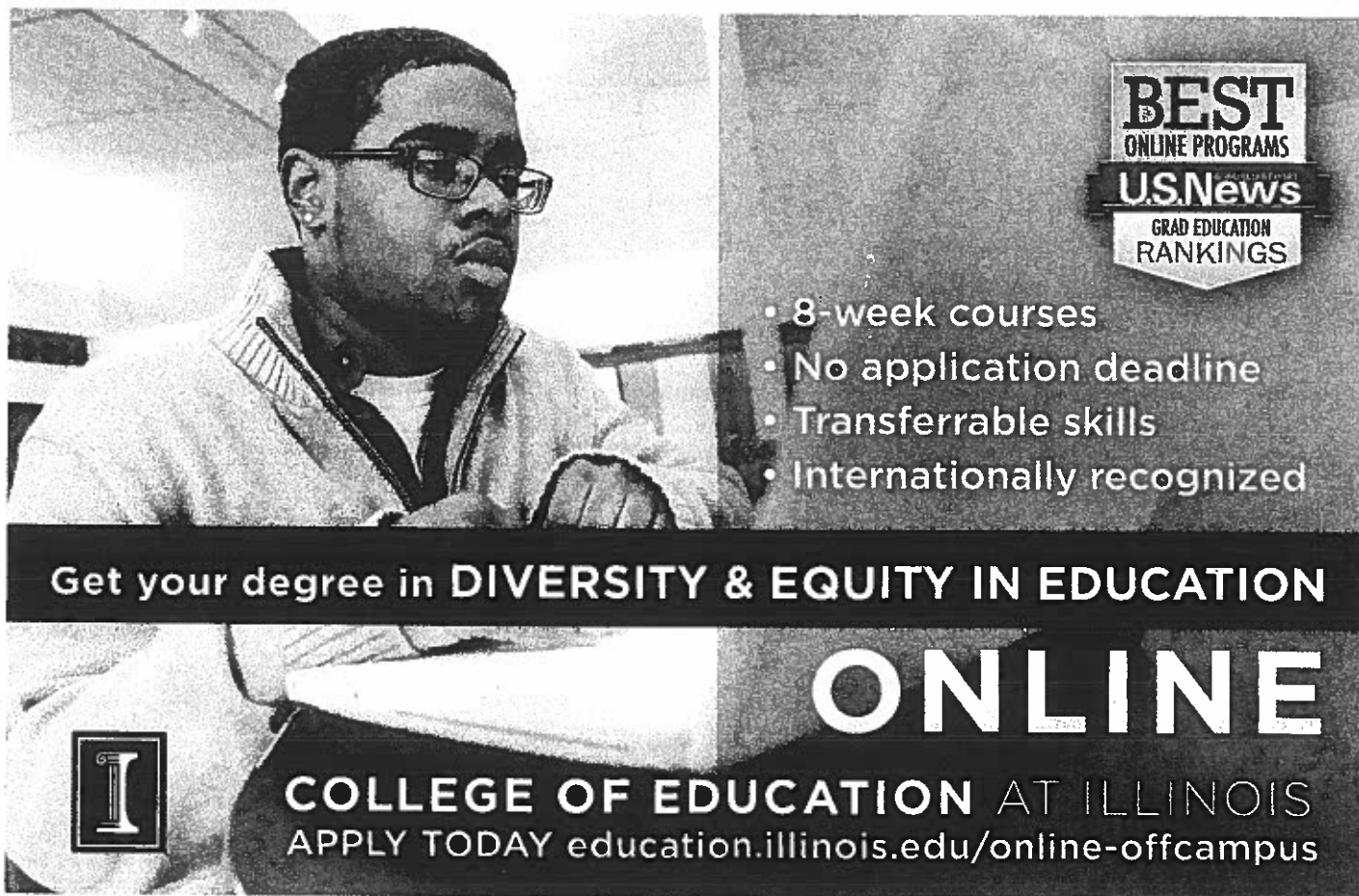
They freeze when students like Maya are disengaged and not doing work. She may have issues going on that they can't identify with, and she's probably not going to open up to them anyway because she knows that, too. Does that make it OK to ignore what is clearly work avoidance and instead go to help students who have eager hands in the air? They freeze when students like Isaac storm out and say that they hate the school and every brick in it. Does that justify punt-kicking Isaac to Mr. Jones, because Mr. Jones goes to church with his family? They freeze when Shauna is watching twerk videos on her phone during science class. Sure, there are rules about phones

in school, but do we tell her to put away her personal property and risk a class-melting blowout? They freeze when it's time to call Julius' father because Julius needs a tutor. Julius' father just got out of jail. Does that justify letting Julius fall by the wayside? Or deflecting Julius directly to the principal because his father has a record?

"Phone conversations with parents don't go well."

I've had my share of literal and metaphorical hang-ups when it comes to calling parents, but most conversations have been helpful. When I call parents or guardians, I follow these guidelines.

1. Address them as Mr., Ms. or Mrs., followed by their name on record. No assumptions. If needed, I ask how to say their name properly—and remember it.



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2. Refer to their child by their given name.
3. Talk to the parents. Highlight the positive, academically and socially.
4. When explaining the issue to parents, have concrete evidence without interpretation, and give the parent a chance to respond. For example, "Today when James was with another student, he pulled her chair out, and the student fell," instead of "James hurt another student at his table and caused disruption to my lesson."
5. Ask for the parent's help. The student is their child forever, I am their teacher for one year. Look to the parent as an expert.
6. Make a deal among parent, student, and yourself as to how all three will help the child be successful in the area of concern.
7. Call back in two weeks to update and thank the parent.

"I'm giving them someone positive to identify with. What's wrong with that?"

Although white teachers may feel that they are doing a service to children by sending them to someone identifiable, it's actually a backfire. Each time a child is sent to another adult in the building to manage behavior, the teacher loses a little power, no matter what race the child or teacher is. However, there's a subliminal message that many white teachers are blind to, yet it's a bold, glaring truth to parents and students of color: This teacher does not care. Today, I implore you to care. Care enough about this student to build and fortify your own special relationship with them. Care enough about this student to work at figuring out where communication breaks down between you. Care enough about this

student to make them pull their weight and work when it's time to work. Care enough about this student to see if there are academic, health, social, or emotional reasons for their work avoidance. Care enough about this student to call on their parents for help, knowing that a parent is more of an influential teacher than you are. And care enough about your colleagues of color to stop using them to clean up your mess.

My strength in the classroom does not come from my racial identity, and neither does yours.

Clearly, being uncaring is not the message that any teacher is trying to send. It is inherent that teachers care about the people in their schools. Otherwise, they'd look for jobs that pay more and do less. And just like I don't know of parents who condone misbehavior, I don't know of teachers of any race who intentionally seek to send a message that they don't care.

"I can't control that I am white. How can I show my students of color that I care?"

Allowing fear to cripple your ability to develop relationships in your personal life would have devastating emotional effects, so why allow fear to shroud your intelligence as a compassionate educator? The fear of a race of people fuels the furnace of failure for students of color. Just because you are a white teacher and do not experience life through the same lens as your students of color, it doesn't mean you can't build an environment where realness, rigor, and relationships abound in your classroom.

If you are a teacher of a student of color, and you have ever asked a co-worker of color to "help," "guide," "mentor," or "just talk to" a student of color that you've had difficulty working with, it's time for you to wake up. Trust me,

there's a time in every classroom where a kid needs to go so that either she—or you—can cool off. The revolving door of kids of color, however, needs to stop.

When you send your students to teachers like me, you are inadvertently forcing me to contribute to a racist system, asking me to tell kids how to behave within your four walls and sending them back. That is not fair to them, and it's not fair to me. You need to find that bone in

your body that tends to recoil when it comes time to deal with people of color—and purposely straighten it back out. You must confront your own discomfort at all costs. Find out why you really don't want to call home, hold the child after school, tell him to sit down, or tell her to finish that essay.

To effectively teach children of color, you need to understand this: I know that you don't look or sound like me, but that doesn't mean that you have no power. My strength in the classroom does not come from my racial identity, and neither does yours. It comes from the way we treat—and what we expect from—kids and families. It is time for you to take back the power in your classroom. By all means, seek out the advice of colleagues of color, but don't send your students to us without first examining the patchwork needing to be done in your teacher practice. ■

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PAPO GOT HIS GUN!

by Victor Hernandez Cruz



BRING THE SOUL BLOCKS

JITTERBUG
IS OUT
STILL
THE SMELL IS HERE
RISING LIKE
FROM THE GUTTER
AND DOWN FROM THE ROOFS
AND SINKS
INTO NEW GENERATION
BUT ALL IS COOL
SOUL DOMINATES
SOUL MAKES YOU SING
FROM THE GUTTER
HEAT
PEOPLE COME OUT
MIX
SOUL BLOCKS
STRETCH AND ALMOST SING
I SIT AND WRITE
BECAUSE THE SOUL BLOCKS

Photos by George de Vincent

PAPO GOT HIS GUN

I. I WENT TO P.S. 107

**LEARNED THE ABC
YOU TOLD ME OF WASHINGTON
OF LINCOLN
OF JEFFERSON
THE BOSTON TEA PARTY
AND ON AND ON
AND ALL THIS TIME GOING TO SCHOOL
MANY THINGS WERE HAPPENING
ON THE BLOCK
ON 100 STREET JITTERBUGGING
WAS GOING HARD
DOWNTOWN, THE WEST SIDE, BROOKLYN
DRAGONS, SPORTSMANS, ENCHANTERS
ALL OVER THE CITY
AND YOU TALKED ABOUT IT IN FEAR
AND TOLD YOUR TEEN-AGE DAUGHTER
TO BE CAREFUL
OF THOSE SAVAGES
WALKING THE STREETS.**

II. I WENT TO JHS 93

**THE STREETS WERE A LITTLE COOLER
BUT STILL IT WAS HAPPENING
THE PUMPS IN THE SUMMER
THE FIGHTS, THE BEER, THE STOOPS
JHS WAS BOSS
NOT BECAUSE OF WHAT YOU TAUGHT ME
BUT BECAUSE OF WHAT I LEARNED
WHICH WAS NOT WHAT YOU TAUGHT ME
TIME WENT BY FAST
THE BATMAN RUMOR WAS ON
IN EL BARRIO
THE OLD ENCHANTERS
WERE BREAKING UP
TITO WAS SHOT ON 102
LOTS OF GIGS WERE HAD
WE HEARD LITTLE ANTHONY AND
THE IMPERIALS
BUT I HAD THE FEEL THAT SOMETHING
LIKE AN ERA
WAS GOING BY.**

III. JITTERBUGGING IS OUT NOW

**NOT BECAUSE OF THE STREET WORKERS
BUT BECAUSE OF OUR OWN SEARCH
AND FOR US NOW A NEW WAY OF LIFE HAS ARISEN
AND I TELL YOU NOW
WASHINGTON, LINCOLN AND THE BOSTON TEA PARTY
DON'T MEAN NOTHING TO ME
YOUR TWO PARTY SYSTEM
YOUR DEMOCRACY, YOUR FREEDOM
YOUR FREE ENTERPRISE, YOUR WARS
YES PAPO KNOWS ABOUT THIS NOW
PAPO KNOWS MANY THINGS NOW
AND NOW THE SHIT IS ON
PAPO KNOWS YOU LIE
PAPO KNOWS YOU CHEAT
PAPO KNOWS YOU STEAL
PAPO KNOWS HOW YOU GOT RICH
AND YOU SAY LOOK THIS SPIC
HE'S CRAZY LOOK HOW HE TALKS
BUT DON'T FORGET NOW
PAPO GOT HIS GUN.**

The Opinion Pages

THE STONE

What's Wrong With 'All Lives Matter'?By **George Yancy** and **Judith Butler**

January 12, 2015 9:00 pm

The Stone is a forum for contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless.

This is the fifth in a series of interviews with philosophers on race that I am conducting for The Stone. This week's conversation is with Judith Butler, Maxine Elliot Professor in the department of comparative literature and the program of critical theory at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of numerous influential books, including "Dispossession: The Performative in the Political," which she co-authored with Athena Athanasiou. She will publish a book on public assemblies with Harvard University Press this year. — George Yancy

George Yancy: In your 2004 book, "Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence," you wrote, "The question that preoccupies me in the light of recent global violence is, Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives?" You wrote that about the post-9/11 world, but it appears to also apply to the racial situation here in the United States. In the wake of the recent killings of unarmed black men and women by police, and the failure to prosecute the killers, the message being sent to black communities is that they don't matter, that they are "disposable." Posters reading "Black Lives Matter," "Hands Up. Don't Shoot," "I Can't Breathe," communicate the reality of a specific kind of racial vulnerability that black people experience on a daily basis. How does all this communicate to black people that their lives don't matter?

Judith Butler: Perhaps we can think about the phrase "black lives matter." What is implied by this statement, a statement that should be obviously true, but apparently is not? If black lives do not matter, then they are not really

regarded as lives, since a life is supposed to matter. So what we see is that some lives matter more than others, that some lives matter so much that they need to be protected at all costs, and that other lives matter less, or not at all. And when that becomes the situation, then the lives that do not matter so much, or do not matter at all, can be killed or lost, can be exposed to conditions of destitution, and there is no concern, or even worse, that is regarded as the way it is supposed to be. The callous killing of Tamir Rice and the abandonment of his body on the street is an astonishing example of the police murdering someone considered disposable and fundamentally ungrievable.

When we are talking about racism, and anti-black racism in the United States, we have to remember that under slavery black lives were considered only a fraction of a human life, so the prevailing way of valuing lives assumed that some lives mattered more, were more human, more worthy, more deserving of life and freedom, where freedom meant minimally the freedom to move and thrive without being subjected to coercive force. But when and where did black lives ever really get free of coercive force? One reason the chant "Black Lives Matter" is so important is that it states the obvious but the obvious has not yet been historically realized. So it is a statement of outrage and a demand for equality, for the right to live free of constraint, but also a chant that links the history of slavery, of debt peonage, segregation, and a prison system geared toward the containment, neutralization and degradation of black lives, but also a police system that more and more easily and often can take away a black life in a flash all because some officer perceives a threat.

So let us think about what this is: the perception of a threat. One man is leaving a store unarmed, but he is perceived as a threat. Another man is in a chokehold and states that he cannot breathe, and the chokehold is not relaxed, and the man dies because he is perceived as a threat. Mike Brown and Eric Garner. We can name them, but in the space of this interview, we cannot name all the black men and women whose lives are snuffed out all because a police officer perceives a threat, sees the threat in the person, sees the person as pure threat. Perceived as a threat even when unarmed or completely physically subdued, or lying in the

ground, as Rodney King clearly was, or coming back home from a party on the train and having the audacity to say to a policeman that he was not doing anything wrong and should not be detained: Oscar Grant. We can see the videos and know what is obviously true, but it is also obviously true that police and the juries that support them obviously do not see what is obvious, or do not wish to see.

So the police see a threat when there is no gun to see, or someone is subdued and crying out for his life, when they are moving away or cannot move. These figures are perceived as threats even when they do not threaten, when they have no weapon, and the video footage that shows precisely this is taken to be a ratification of the police's perception. The perception is then ratified as a public perception at which point we not only must insist on the dignity of black lives, but name the racism that has become ratified as public perception.

In fact, the point is not just that black lives can be disposed of so easily: they are targeted and hunted by a police force that is becoming increasingly emboldened to wage its race war by every grand jury decision that ratifies the point of view of state violence. Justifying lethal violence in the name of self-defense is reserved for those who have a publicly recognized self to defend. But those whose lives are not considered to matter, whose lives are perceived as a threat to the life that embodies white privilege can be destroyed in the name of that life. That can only happen when a recurrent and institutionalized form of racism has become a way of seeing, entering into the presentation of visual evidence to justify hateful and unjustified and heartbreaking murder.

So it is not just that black lives matter, though that must be said again and again. It is also that stand-your-ground and racist killings are becoming increasingly normalized, which is why intelligent forms of collective outrage have become obligatory.

G.Y.: The chant "Black Lives Matter" is also a form of what you would call "a mode of address." You discuss questions of address in your essay, "Violence, Nonviolence: Sartre and Fanon," where Fanon, for example, raises significant questions about sociality in talking about his freedom in relationship to a "you."

“Black Lives Matter” says something like: “*You* — white police officers — recognize my/our humanity!” But what if the “you,” in this case, fails to be moved, refuses to be touched by that embodied chant? And given that “racism has become a way of seeing,” is it not necessary that we — as you say in your essay “Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia”— install “an antiracist hegemony over the visual field”?

J.B.: Sometimes a mode of address is quite simply a way of speaking to or about someone. But a mode of address may also describe a general way of approaching another such that one presumes who the other is, even the meaning and value of their existence. We address each other with gesture, signs and movement, but also through media and technology. We make such assumptions all the time about who that other is when we hail someone on the street (or we do not hail them). That is someone I greet; the other is someone I avoid. That other may well be someone whose very existence makes me cross to the other side of the road.

Indeed, in the case of schematic racism, anti-black racism figures black people through a certain lens and filter, one that can quite easily construe a black person, or another racial minority, who is walking toward us as someone who is potentially, or actually, threatening, or is considered, in his very being, a threat. In fact, as we can doubtless see from the videos that have swept across the global media, it may be that even when a black man is moving away from the police, that man is still considered to be a threat or worth killing, as if that person were actually moving toward the police brandishing a weapon. Or it could be that a black man or woman is reaching for his or her identification papers to show to the police, and the police see in that gesture of compliance — hand moving toward pocket — a reach for a gun. Is that because, in the perception of the police, to be black is already to be reaching for a gun? Or a black person is sleeping on the couch, standing, walking, or even running, clearly brandishing no gun, and there turns out to be evidence that there is no gun, still that life is snuffed out — why? Is the gun imagined into the scene, or retrospectively attributed to the standing or fleeing figure (and the grand jury nods, saying “this is plausible.”)? And why when that person is down, already on the ground, and seeks to lift himself, or seated against a

subway grate, and seeks to speak on his own behalf, or is utterly subdued and imperiled by the chokehold, he never stops looming as a threat to security, prompting a policeman to beat him or gun him down?

It may be important to see the twisted vision and the inverted assumptions that are made in the course of building a “case” that the police acted in self-defense or were sufficiently provoked to use lethal force. The fleeing figure is coming this way; the nearly strangled person is about to unleash force; the man on the ground will suddenly spring to life and threaten the life of the one who therefore takes his life.

These are war zones of the mind that play out on the street. At least in these cases that have galvanized the nation and the world in protest, we all see the twisted logic that results in the exoneration of the police who take away the lives of unarmed black men and women. And why is that the case? It is not because what the police and their lawyers present as their thinking in the midst of the situation is very reasonable. No, it is because that form of thinking is *becoming more “reasonable” all the time*. In other words, every time a grand jury or a police review board accepts this form of reasoning, they ratify the idea that blacks are a population against which society must be defended, and that the police defend themselves and (white) society, when they preemptively shoot unarmed black men in public space. At stake is a way that black people are figured as a threat even when they are simply living their lives, walking the street, leaving the convenience store, riding the subway, because in those instances this is only a threatening life, or a threat to the only kind of life, white life, that is recognized.

G.Y.: What has led us to this place?

J.B.: Racism has complex origins, and it is important that we learn the history of racism to know what has led us to this terrible place. But racism is also reproduced in the present, in the prison system, new forms of population control, increasing economic inequality that affects people of color disproportionately. These forms of institutionalized destitution and inequality are reproduced through these daily encounters — the disproportionate numbers of minorities stopped and

detained by the police, and the rising number of those who fall victim to police violence. The figure of the black person as threat, as criminal, as someone who is, no matter where he is going, already-on-the-way-to-prison, conditions these pre-emptive strikes, attributing lethal aggression to the very figure who suffers it most. The lives taken in this way are not lives worth grieving; they belong to the increasing number of those who are understood as ungrievable, whose lives are thought not to be worth preserving.

But, of course, what we are also seeing in the recent and continuing assemblies, rallies and vigils is an open mourning for those whose lives were cut short and without cause, brutally extinguished. The practices of public mourning and political demonstration converge: when lives are considered ungrievable, to grieve them openly is protest. So when people assemble in the street, arrive at rallies or vigils, demonstrate with the aim of opposing this form of racist violence, they are “speaking back” to this mode of address, insisting on what should be obvious but is not, namely, that these lost lives are unacceptable losses.

On the one hand, there is a message, “Black Lives Matter,” which always risks being misheard (“What? Only *black* lives matter?”) or not heard at all (“these are just people who will protest anything”). On the other hand, the assembly, even without words, enacts the message in its own way. For it is often in public spaces where such violence takes place, so reclaiming public space to oppose both racism and violence is an act that reverberates throughout the public sphere through various media.

G.Y.: I’ve heard that some white people have held signs that read “All Lives Matter.”

J.B.: When some people rejoin with “All Lives Matter” they misunderstand the problem, but not because their message is untrue. It is true that all lives matter, but it is equally true that not all lives are understood to matter which is precisely why it is most important to name the lives that have not mattered, and are struggling to matter in the way they deserve.

Claiming that “all lives matter” does not immediately mark or enable black lives only because they have not been fully recognized as having lives that matter. I do not mean this as an obscure riddle. I mean only to say that we cannot have a race-blind approach to the questions: which lives matter? Or, which lives are worth valuing? If we jump too quickly to the universal formulation, “all lives matter,” then we miss the fact that black people have not yet been included in the idea of “all lives.” That said, it is true that all lives matter (we can then debate about when life begins or ends). But to make that universal formulation concrete, to make that into a living formulation, one that truly extends to all people, we have to foreground those lives that are not mattering now, to mark that exclusion, and militate against it. Achieving that universal, “all lives matter,” is a struggle, and that is part of what we are seeing on the streets. For on the streets we see a complex set of solidarities across color lines that seek to show what a concrete and living sense of bodies that matter can be.

G.Y: When you talk about lives that matter, are you talking about how whiteness and white bodies are valorized? In “Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,” you discuss gender as “a stylized repetition of acts.” Do you also see whiteness as “a stylized repetition of acts” that solidifies and privileges white bodies, or even leads to naïve, “post-racial” universal formulations like “all lives matter”?

J.B.: Yes, we can certainly talk about “doing whiteness” as a way of putting racial categories into action, since whiteness is part of what we call “race,” and is often implicitly or explicitly part of a race project that seeks to achieve and maintain dominance for white people. One way this happens is by establishing whiteness as the norm for the human, and blackness as a deviation from the human or even as a threat to the human, or as something not quite human. Under such perceptual conditions built up through the history of racism, it becomes increasingly easy for white people to accept the destruction of black lives as status quo, since those lives do not fit the norm of “human life” they defend. It is true that Frantz Fanon sometimes understood whiteness in gendered terms: a black man is not a man, according to the white norms that define manhood, and yet other times

the black man is figured as the threat of rape, hyper-masculinized, threatening the “virgin sanctity” of whiteness.

In that last formulation whiteness is figured as a young virgin whose future husband is white — this characterization ratifies the sentiments that oppose miscegenation and defend norms of racial purity. But whose sexuality is imperiled in this scene? After all, black women and girls were the ones who were raped, humiliated and disposed of under conditions of slavery, and it was black families who were forcibly destroyed: black kinship was not recognized as kinship that matters. Women of color, and black feminists in particular, have struggled for years against being the sexual property of either white male power or black masculinity, against poverty, and against the prison industry, so there are many reasons it is necessary to define racism in ways that acknowledge the specific forms it takes against men, women, and transgendered people of color.

Let us remember, of course, that many black women’s lives are taken by police and by prisons. We can name a few: Yvette Smith, 48, in Texas, unarmed, and killed by police; or Aiyana Stanley-Jones, age 7, killed while sleeping on her father’s couch in Detroit. After all, all of those are among the people on the street, outraged and demonstrating, opposing a lethal power that is becoming more and more normalized and, to that degree, more and more outrageous.

Whiteness is less a property of skin than a social power reproducing its dominance in both explicit and implicit ways. When whiteness is a practice of superiority over minorities, it monopolizes the power of destroying or demeaning bodies of color. The legal system is engaged in reproducing whiteness when it decides that the black person can and will be punished more severely than the white person who commits the same infraction, when that same differential is at work in the question, who can and will be detained? And who can and will be sent to prison with a life sentence or the death penalty? Angela Davis has shown the disproportionate number of Americans of color (black and Latino) detained, imprisoned and on death row. This has become a “norm” that effectively says “black lives do not matter,” one that is built up over time, through daily practices, modes of address, through the organization of schools, work, prison, law and

media. Those are all ways that the conceit of white superiority is constructed.

G.Y.: Yes. Whiteness, as a set of historical practices, extends beyond the skin. And yet, when a person with white skin walks into a store, it is assumed that she is not a threat. So, there is an entire visual technology that is complicit here, where the skin itself, as it were, is the marker of innocence. It is a visual technology that reinforces not only her sense of innocence, but that organizes the ways in which she gets to walk through space without being profiled or stopped. Hence, she contributes to the perpetuation of racial injustice even if she is unaware of doing so.

J.B.: Well, of course, class is also there as a marker of how anyone is perceived entering the door to the public building, the office, the post office, the convenience store. Class is in play when white people fail to look “moneyed” or are considered as working class, poor or homeless, so we have to be clear that the “white” person we may be talking about can be struggling with inequality of another kind: whiteness has its own internal hierarchies, to be sure. Of course there are white people who may be very convinced that they are not racist, but that does not necessarily mean that they have examined, or worked through, how whiteness organizes their lives, values, the institutions they support, how they are implicated in ways of talking, seeing, and doing that constantly and tacitly discriminate. Undoing whiteness has to be difficult work, but it starts, I think, with humility, with learning history, with white people learning how the history of racism persists in the everyday vicissitudes of the present, even as some of us may think we are “beyond” such a history, or even convinced that we have magically become “post-racial.” It is difficult and ongoing work, calling on an ethical disposition and political solidarity that risks error in the practice of solidarity.

Whiteness is not an abstraction; its claim to dominance is fortified through daily acts which may not seem racist at all precisely because they are considered “normal.” But just as certain kinds of violence and inequality get established as “normal” through the proceedings that exonerate police of the lethal use of force against unarmed black people, so whiteness, or rather its claim to privilege, can be disestablished over time. This is why there must be a collective reflection on, and

opposition to, the way whiteness takes hold of our ideas about whose lives matter. The norm of whiteness that supports both violence and inequality insinuates itself into the normal and the obvious. Understood as the sometimes tacit and sometimes explicit power to define the boundaries of kinship, community and nation, whiteness inflects all those frameworks within which certain lives are made to matter less than others.

It is always possible to do whiteness otherwise, to engage in a sustained and collective practice to question how racial differentiation enters into our daily evaluations of which lives deserve to be supported, to flourish, and which do not. But it is probably an error, in my view, for white people to become paralyzed with guilt and self-scrutiny. The point is rather to consider those ways of valuing and devaluing life that govern our own thinking and acting, understanding the social and historical reach of those ways of valuing. It is probably important and satisfying as well to let one's whiteness recede by joining in acts of solidarity with all those who oppose racism. There are ways of fading out whiteness, withdrawing its implicit and explicit claim to racial privilege.

Demonstrations have the potential to embody forms of equality that we want to see realized in the world more broadly. Working against those practices and institutions that refuse to recognize and mark the powers of state racism in particular, assemblies gather to mourn and resist the deadly consequences of such powers. When people engage in concerted actions across racial lines to build communities based on equality, to defend the rights of those who are disproportionately imperiled to have a chance to live without the fear of dying quite suddenly at the hands of the police. There are many ways to do this, in the street, the office, the home, and in the media. Only through such an ever-growing cross-racial struggle against racism can we begin to achieve a sense of all the lives that really do matter.

This interview was conducted by email and edited. Previous interviews in this series can be found [here](#).

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written, edited and co-edited numerous books, including “Black Bodies, White Gazes,” “Look, a White!” and “Pursuing Trayvon Martin,” co-edited with Janine Jones.

Correction: January 13, 2015

An earlier version of this article misspelled the first name of the boy killed by a police officer in Cleveland. His name is Tamir Rice, not Tamar.