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CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS:

Mark Latta is an Assistant Professor of English at Marian University where he also serves as the Director for the Marian University Writing Center and Faculty Lead for Community Engaged Learning. He also directs the Flanner Community Writing Center. His research and teaching practices explore the entanglements between literacy, urban theory, and humanizing and decolonizing inquiry. Latta is a PhD candidate in Urban Education Studies at Indiana University.

Abbey Chambers recently completed her PhD in American Studies at Indiana University-Purdue University-Indianapolis (IUPUI). She has a master's degree in Art History from Indiana University, Bloomington. Her doctoral research uses visual culture theory and ethnographic methods to show how understanding residents’ perceptions of neighborhood redevelopment can inform economic development processes that are equitable and inclusive.

Dr. Kiesha Warren-Gordon is an Associate Professor of Criminal Justice/Criminology at Ball State University where she also serves as the Director of the African American Studies Program. Dr. Warren-Gordon’s work centers on critical approaches of community engagement while working with marginalized communities. Her research explores the intersection of race, class, and gender as it relates to violence, and intercultural conflict. Dr. Warren-Gordon is also active in the criminal justice professional community. She currently serves as the Past President of the Midwest Criminal Justice Association. She is also Senior Faculty Fellow for Indiana Campus Compact.

Emily Ruth Rutter is an Associate Professor of English at Ball State University. She is the author of Invisible Ball of Dreams: Literary Representations of Baseball behind the Color Line (University Press of Mississippi, 2018), The Blues Muse: Race, Gender, and Musical Celebrity in American Poetry (University of Alabama Press, 2018), and the forthcoming Black Celebrity: Contemporary Representations of Postbellum Athletes and Artists (University of Delaware Press, 2022). Along with Tiffany Austin, Sequoia Maner, and darlene anita scott, she co-edited Revisiting the Elegy in the Black Lives Matter Era (Routledge, 2020). Her numerous essays have been published in African American Review, Aethlon, and MELUS, among other journals.

Darolyn “Lyn” Jones is an activist/teacher/researcher/writer. Passionate about border crossing classrooms into the community, Lyn teaches in the Department of English at Ball State University and serves as director of the Memoir Project for the Indiana Writers Center. Lyn authored Painless Reading Comprehension, co-authored Memory Workshop, and is an editor for Indie presses: INwords Publications, Rethinking Children’s & YA Lit, & 409 Press. Lyn researches and publishes academically in community writing, community engagement, and disability studies.

Dr. Adam Henze is a researcher, educator, and spoken word artist, and has shared his work in over thirty states, as well as Puerto Rico, Canada, England, and Ireland. He is the co-founder of Slam Camp, a summer writing academy for teenage poets, and is the director of Power of a Sentence, a writing workshop series at a women’s prison in Indianapolis. Adam earned a PhD in Literacy, Culture, and Language Education at Indiana University, where he also works as a Research Associate at the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community. Adam has facilitated educational programming at over a dozen prisons and juvenile detention centers in Indiana, Florida, Kentucky, Illinois, and Arkansas. Articles about his work as an artist and educator have appeared in Japan Times, USA Today, the Indianapolis Star, and on NPR, PBS, the Big Ten Network, and Chalkbeat. Adam is a Program Director at Southern
Fried Poetry, Inc., which hosts one of the largest and longest-running poetry slam festivals in the world.

**JesAlana Stewart** holds a doctorate in literacy, culture, and language education. She has dedicated her career to fostering enthusiasm in the classroom, promoting multilingual collaboration, and facilitating communication internationally. Due to her background in linguistics, she is fluent in Spanish, proficient in French, and has studied Mandarin, Italian, and Portuguese, developing in her a deep sense of responsibility to empower people through global educational opportunities that focus on equity and inclusion. Through this responsibility her research interests are interdisciplinary in nature, combining theory and inquiry in the fields of foreign languages, linguistics, literacy, rhetoric, global studies, and education.

**Maria Hamilton Abegunde** is an ancestral priest, healer, and poet. Her creative work and scholarship focus on healing intergenerational traumas related to slavery and sexual violence through ritual, contemplative practices, and community-based art. Her work has been published in the *Massachusetts Review*, *Trielo Quarterly*, *COGzine*, the *Kenyon Review*, *Best African American Fiction*, *nocturnes*, *rhino*, and several anthologies, including *I Feel a Little Jumpy around You, Catch the Fire*, and *Beyond the Frontier: African American Poetry for the 21st Century*. Commissioned work appears in *Be/Coming* and *Keeper of My Mothers Dreams*. Excerpts from *Learning to Eat the Dead: Juba, USA* was a COG finalist. Dr. Abegunde is a Cave Canem fellow. Her writing fellowships include those from Sacatar, Ragdale, and Norcroft. She was an NEH Summer Institute fellow in the Black Aesthetics and African Centered Cultural Expressions project. She has received grants from Indiana Humanities/National Endowment for the Arts, the Illinois Arts Council, and the Barbara Deming Foundation. She is the director of The Graduate Mentoring Center and a faculty member in African American and African Diaspora Studies at Indiana University Bloomington. She likes to read and watch science fiction, laugh, do nothing, and dance in the street when the music is groovy.

**Celeste Williams** is a former newspaper journalist, having worked at daily newspapers in Indiana, Alabama, Tennessee, and Wisconsin. She won several national awards and a Pulitzer Prize nomination for her reporting on extreme poverty in Mississippi. She is also a poet and playwright. Her play, *More Light: Douglass Returns*, in conjunction with Asante Children’s Theatre, ran two summers at Conner Prairie Interactive History Park. She is president of the board of directors of the Indiana Writers Center.

**Tatjana Rebelle** (they/she) is a mother, activist, organizer, writer, performer and promoter. They have lived in Indianapolis most of their life, which is where they learned to use their writing to deal with growing up in the Midwest as a bisexual, biracial child of an immigrant. They are the founder of VOCAB, an all-inclusive monthly spoken word and live music event that is in its thirteenth year. They have been fighting for social justice for communities of color and QTBIPOC rights for several years on their own. As well as American Friends Service Committee, combating Islamophobia, white supremacy and fighting for Palestinian liberation. AFSC gave them the chance to follow in the footsteps of their idol, Bayard Rustin in taking a nonviolent stance against global and local oppression. Tatjana’s goal is to bring activism to the people via their current work in Environmental Justice with Earth Charter Indiana.
Cristina Santamaría Graff is an Assistant Professor of Special Education, Urban Teacher Education at IUPUI. She has expertise in bilingual/multicultural special education and applies her skills in working with Latinx immigrant families of children with dis/abilities in family-centered projects. Her scholarship focuses on ways community engaged partnerships with families and other stakeholders can transform inequitable practices impacting youth with dis/abilities at the intersections of race, class, and other identity markers of difference. Though Cristina’s scholarship is mainly represented through academic writing, she is excited to share this poem to communicate through imagery, symbolism, and metaphor the emotional impact of being ‘othered’ as shared by several families she has had the honor of listening to and learning from. This poem is a composite of their stories.


Front Cover Art: “City ala Tilator,” by Dan Zen. Creative Commons License.
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I. EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION
The Right to Re/Make, Destroying to Replace, and the Terrain of Future Imaginations

Mark Latta

What started in 2019 became something else when 2020 began to sink in. So it goes for this special issue of The North Meridian Review, an issue themed “the freedom to make and remake,” emerging from David Harvey’s essay, “The Right to the City.”¹ When the call for article proposals went out, Harvey’s right to the city and the idea of a freedom to re/make had a particular range of meanings. While important at the time, our current moment of pandemics has rendered the implications of making and remaking with a palpable salience and demands urgency as we consider who does and does not have the freedom to re/make.

The idea for this issue originally came about because of a public art installation in Indianapolis known as Ann Dancing. Ann Dancing was commissioned by the Indianapolis Cultural Trail and created by Julian Opie.² The artwork uses animated LED lights to display a female figure swaying back and forth across the electronic panel. Ann dances in this way, slowly undulating her hips across each of the installation’s four panels. The sculpture sits in the center of a small plaza at a well-traveled intersection along Indy’s Cultural Trail.

Originally installed in 2007, *Ann Dancing* was meant to be temporary. However, as the story goes, the animated sculpture proved so popular that *Ann Dancing* was not removed. In 2019, the Indianapolis Cultural Trail, Inc., the nonprofit responsible for management of the eight miles of trails in Indy’s urban core, announced a fundraiser to “keep Ann Dancing.”\(^3\) The artwork needed substantial repairs and upgrades. To keep Ann dancing, the Indianapolis Cultural Trail announced a crowdsourcing fundraiser with a goal of almost $270,000.

The request was not universally well received.

While some people thought little of soliciting a quarter of a million dollars in private donations, many others thought the figure was excessive. That Indianapolis Cultural Trail, Inc. had not originally stated how the money would be used when they rolled out the fundraiser did not help matters.

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(although they later published a breakdown of expenses in response to the criticism). Some people in Indy would have opposed spending any amount of money on *Ann Dancing*, but others—maybe most—considered themselves generally supportive of public art but thought $270,000 was excessive—perhaps even obscene.

Looking back, it seems difficult to imagine given all the worries 2020 has provided, but the announcement by Indianapolis Cultural Trail, Inc. that “Ann Needs You”⁴ to give $270,000 caused a bit of a stir in Indy. The conversation around *Ann Dancing* and the quarter of a million dollars needed to keep her swaying was, of course, deeply entangled in long-running conversations within urban studies about who has a “right to the city,”⁵ about whose rights seem to gain inertia and whose rights seem marked by permanent erasure and dispossession, and about who and what is over-resourced and who or what is under-resourced.

Prior to the fundraising announcement and well before COVID-19 and the uprising against racism, however, the Ann Dancing Plaza was also a popular gathering spot for a number of people in Indianapolis who were experiencing homelessness. When I walked through the plaza each morning on the way to catch my bus, I passed by benches occupied by men gathered there to share relevant bits of news and enjoy each other’s fellowship (see Figure 1). It seemed to me that—at least during particular times of the day—these men were the most visible examples of democratic users of what was arguably a democratic gathering space. These (mostly) men had probably logged more hours with Ann than anyone else in the city. They happily offered to take pictures of couples who posed in front of the sculpture, and some would routinely share the story of how Ann came to be. Had these men been consulted about the proposed fundraiser? Had they been asked whether they would in some way be the beneficiaries of the $270,000 request?

⁵ Harvey, “Right to The City,” 23–40.
After months of fundraising through direct donations, *Ann Dancing*—inspired merchandise, $250 tickets to the Keep Ann Dancing Dinner, and a gala held in the streets surrounding the artwork, Indianapolis Cultural Trail, Inc. raised $200,000—nearly one-third less than their original fundraising target. Nevertheless, the fundraiser was declared a success. *Ann Dancing* was updated and her electronic panels were replaced.

As part of the update, the benches surrounding Ann—a popular gathering place for a number of those who are shelter-deprived—were removed. The plaza remains benchless today, and those who used to gather there are no longer present. Through an email exchange, Kären Haley, the executive director of Indianapolis Cultural Trail, Inc., stated the organization will “install some sort of seating arrangement, yes. It may or may not be the benches that were there before and our timeline is not set due to the physical distancing requirements in place. We are also evaluating the traffic (pedestrian and bike) through the area and also how the plaza is used to help us determine what we move forward with.”  

As of the printing of this special issue, there are no signs that the benches will return anytime soon, even though restaurants surrounding the plaza have expanded their outdoor seating areas due to COVID-19, encroaching closer to the edges of Ann Dancing Plaza.

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The remaking of *Ann Dancing* and Ann Dancing Plaza represents what “accumulation by dispossession” may look like when it occurs on a smaller scale and through means that are more palatable to an urban liberal-leaning audience. Accumulation by dispossession refers to the ways “capitalism and production of capital has perhaps always required the displacement and perpetual landlessness of some for the accumulation of others.”  

Resources that could have gone to any variety of agencies and causes went instead to the replacement of a public art project originally intended to

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6 Kären Haley in discussion with the author, July 2020.
be temporary. Yes, private donations were raised—but the space was and is ostensibly public. Those who were resource precarious routinely used, interacted with, and shaped the contours of Ann Dancing Plaza as a public space. Yet, they watched themselves become further dispossessed and disininvited through the accumulation of donations. Who has—or should have—the right to the city? In the case of Ann Dancing, the answer seems to be that a caricature of a human and those who enjoy the aesthetics of this caricature have more of right to the city and its resources than the real humans who live in and shape this space.

While the origins of this special issue of North Meridian Review are connected to Ann Dancing, they are also shaped by the larger systemic realities of a society that has normalized dispossession and erasure; Ann Dancing is just one small local example. The past few months have accelerated the ways American society erases through replacement and clarified who or what is routinely targeted for dispossession through accumulation. Patrick Wolfe refers to this dispossession as “destroying to replace”9 and situates it as a key feature of the settler-colonial logic10 that forms the historical and current basis of the United States and Westernized terrains. COVID-19 has made apparent the structural inequalities of American society in ways that are nearly impossible to ignore or explain away (although marketing and political machinery are hard at work trying). Anti-Blackness and anti-poorness have always been understood, by those willing to look, as required within settler-colonial societies, not aberrations or the result of unintended consequences. The twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racism have made this apparent in ways that resist erasure.

And while there is no shortage of fear and suffering to be found today, there is also reason to hope. All around us, we see examples of people refusing to be destroyed in order to be replaced. While

this is a time of upheaval, it is also a time of possibility. This moment asks many things of us. One of the things it asks of us is to not lose sight of our humanity and the choices we commit toward living in humanizing ways. We have not only an opportunity but also a moral obligation to refuse to remain silent about dehumanizing systems, to develop our capacity for imagining which equitable structures might come next, and to then implement strategies that will help bring about new tomorrows. Thomas Piketty, in an interview, remarked, “We need to take ideas about the ideal society we would like to have more seriously. . . Ideas and ideologies are important, so if we care about moving toward a different economic system, then we have to articulate a view of the ideal economic system we want.”

How might we do this? One suggestion is to never allow ourselves to forget that the future is constructed by what we do in the here and now. Another suggestion is to remember that, yes, while we should attend to the present moments, we must also attend to what Goodyear-Ka’opua calls futurity: the “ways that groups imagine and produce knowledge about futures.” To that end, the works in this issue help bring futurity into focus by illustrating some of the ways we might produce knowledge about futures as we also work to remake and erase present-day dispossession.

David Harvey wrote, “The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.” While I agree that this freedom is one of our most precious rights, I respectfully disagree that this freedom has been neglected. People make and remake, resist making and remaking, and re-define what it means to (re)make themselves and their cities every day. For some, their entire existence is the exercise of the right to make and remake. Our settler-colonial society may work to erase and replace these efforts, but people are engaged in continual (re)making as resistance in ways that remain impossible to account

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13 Harvey, “Right to the City,” 23.
for fully. The authors in this issue demonstrate some of ways people and places are made and remade. Additional examples of replacement through creation abound in our current moment as well as within the generations of counternarratives that have come before us. We are able to look to these examples as we make knowledge about futures.

As the poems and essays in this issue ask us to think more deeply about who or what is able to make and remake, the desire is that we will also think about how our future terrains can be made and remade. Which futures do we want, and how will we generate knowledge about these futures? If we hope to dismantle the dispossession and erasure of our past and present, we must also dismantle them within the terrain of future imaginations. Perhaps when we finally and fully surface stories that resist destruction through replacement and instead highlight the creation and recovery of humanity, we may finally reclaim and remake the terrain of the future. How might we use this moment to think about the future we hope to construct and begin to take steps to build the world we want to live in? What does this moment ask of us, and what will we do to move beyond the settler-colonial logics of replacement through destruction? My hope is that the works within this special issue will move us closer to answering these questions.

Acknowledgement

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Bibliography


II. SCHOLARSHIP
Reimagining Urban Spaces and the Processes that Shape and Create Them

Abbey Chambers

ABSTRACT

Cities across the United States are full of “unfreedoms,” which manifest in the form of poverty and other infringements on people’s abilities to do things they value in their lives. These unfreedoms affect already-disenfranchised populations more than others. To maximize freedoms, overcome unfreedoms, and move toward the shaping and creating of more inclusive social and physical urban spaces, and more equitable social and economic outcomes, we must design different ways of producing urban spaces. This article describes a theoretical framework for imagining our relationships with and in urban spaces and the processes that shape and create them. It presents a case study observed through an ethnographic research project in a disinvested neighborhood in Indianapolis, Indiana, to illustrate how defined and abstract forms of power can accumulate and operate in ways that suit the values and priorities of individuals and organizations that are well networked and well resourced, edging existing residents out of decision-making processes. Finally, it provides a solution toward rebalancing the power between those well-networked and well-resourced decision makers and existing residents.
REIMAGINING URBAN SPACES AND THE PROCESSES THAT SHAPE AND CREATE THEM

At a high level, urban development processes seek to create conditions under which a city’s economy can achieve and maintain “material prosperity and high quality of life” for residents.14 Nobel Prize–winning economist Amartya Sen says the paramount purpose of development should be to facilitate freedom, which he defines as “individual capabilities to do the things that a person has reason to value.”15 Sen’s concept of freedom aligns with the American ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and it bestows on individuals the ability to define for themselves the things that would give them freedom based on their unique contexts, needs, abilities, and values.

American cities, however, are rampant with structural inequities, or “unfreedoms,” as Sen would call them, which “leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency.”16 For example, many American cities remain segregated by race and income level, which means the predominantly white communities that hold wealth enjoy different economies and opportunities compared to poorer communities, which disproportionately comprise people of color.17 These separations affect factors such as life expectancy and economic mobility—that is, the ability for a child born into poverty to rise out of poverty by adulthood.18

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16 Ibid., xii.
Unfreedoms exist partly because of neoliberal economic policies, such as free trade and deregulation, that facilitate wealth-building capacities among private individuals and entities, which lean naturally toward exclusion. These policies enable development that channels wealth vertically to the top of the socioeconomic spectrum where it pools among the mostly white people who already have wealth, rather than facilitating the type of development Sen talks about, which would equitably distribute wealth horizontally across all communities and demographics. In 2018, Bloomberg noted that “the chasm between rich and poor hasn’t been this wide since data collection began in the 1960s.” These policies have promoted the exclusion of a lot of people and left them struggling with unfreedoms.

In his essay “The Right to the City,” David Harvey critiques current neoliberal urban development processes, explaining how they do not actually solve urban challenges such as housing instability and poverty; they merely displace them by forcing residents who are experiencing those issues to concentrate in areas of the city where rates of such issues may be already high or rising. This is as true in Indianapolis as it is in many cities around the United States. Over the past several years, significant investments in development have occurred in Indianapolis: from 2012 to 2016, combined state and city tax incentives for economic development in the city totaled more than $600 million, and Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) is several years into a $200 million multi-

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21 Pickert, Levin, and Recht, “Americans Earning Over $200,000 Are Flocking to These Neighborhoods.”


neighborhood initiative to revitalize five “neglected pockets” around the city by combining “private-sector investments with federal tax money to spark residential and commercial activity.”\(^{24}\) However, while some Indianapolis neighborhoods, such as those on the near east and southeast sides of downtown, have seen double-digit decreases in poverty since 2010, others, such as those on the near north and northwest sides of downtown, have seen double-digit increases.\(^{25}\) Additionally, while overall poverty in the city has decreased since 2010, the relative poverty rates among the city’s white, Black, and Latinx populations remains consistent: poverty among whites is approximately one-half that of Blacks and approximately one-third that of Latinx people.\(^{26}\) While it is apparent that development has facilitated change, it has seemingly not expanded freedom equitably among all Indianapolis residents.

Building on the writings of Henri Lefebvre, Harvey proposes that the key to alleviating these inequities is by producing urban spaces differently. He says we can shape and create more democratic social and physical urban spaces using development processes that are more equitable and more inclusive of people who are not part of the dominant class.\(^{27}\) The dominant class comprises city leaders and decision makers and those with enough cultural, economic, educational, and social capital to be invited to or to assert themselves at decision-making tables. Collectively, these members have the most influence over shaping the look and feel of urban spaces to produce social and physical spaces embedded with varying and subjective degrees of inclusivity/exclusivity and equity/inequity.

Like Lefebvre, Harvey argues that the kinds of social relations we have are tied to the types of social and physical spaces the dominant class produces and vice-versa.\(^{28}\) Edward Soja agrees, arguing that we must analyze space in different ways to critique social processes—that is, social relations—

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\(^{27}\) Harvey, “Right to the City.”

\(^{28}\) Ibid.
and cultivate “new areas of understanding and political practice.”

Thus, if we want different social relations—that is, if we want development processes to maximize freedoms, overcome unfreedoms, and move toward the shaping and creating of more inclusive social and physical urban spaces and more equitable social and economic outcomes—we must design different ways of producing urban spaces. This will require us to reimagine how we understand urban spaces, the processes used to shape and create them, and the interpretations and perceptions that the processes and spaces evoke in spatial users.

This article describes a theoretical framework for understanding urban spaces and the processes that shape and create them. It presents a case study observed through an ethnographic research project in a disinvested neighborhood in Indianapolis, Indiana, to illustrate how defined and abstract forms of power can accumulate and operate in ways that suit the values and priorities of individuals and organizations that are well networked and well resourced, edging existing residents out of decision-making processes. Finally, it provides a solution toward rebalancing the power between those well-networked and well-resourced decision makers and existing residents.

REIMAGINING HOW WE UNDERSTAND URBAN SPACES

To shape and create urban spaces differently, we must understand urban spaces differently. In particular, we must recognize how (a) urban spaces are shaped and created by a hegemonic system of spatial producers; (b) the hegemonic system embeds spaces with signals that convey meanings to spatial users; and (c) the meanings special users glean from spaces are deeply subjective.

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30 Harvey, “Right to the City.”
31 This framework pertains to urban spaces that are subject to gentrification, where existing residents may find themselves and their community encroached upon by outsiders who are newly seeing value in the neighborhood’s location. In any community, regardless of whether they are urban, suburban, or rural, there will be spaces to which different groups of people want to lay claim and extract value, but the ways in which urban spaces are geographically limited and characteristically diverse in population and uses makes the framework described here particularly evident.
We are all spatial users. We use spaces, such as sidewalks, highways, and public transit systems, to go places, such as to school and work, and we use other spaces, such as parks, restaurants, and offices, to do things, such as spend time with family and friends and hold meetings. However, we generally are not individually or independently producing spaces. Rather, spaces are produced for us “by more powerful others,” which are forces that shape spaces either by creating them anew or by ensuring that spaces retain their shape and thus their power. These forces include the dominant class, collectively comprising city leaders and decision makers, investors, developers, and the like; organizations and institutions, such as city departments and civic and philanthropic entities; and tax and regulatory structures, such as property taxes and zoning ordinances. While these forces have defined power, forces that shape and create spaces may also be less defined, more abstract structures, such as social norms, perceptions, and biases, that guide and undergird decisions. The defined and abstract forces share distributed power that does not come from a single source but that exists like a fog, in small, particulate forms and actions that, when combined, create a significant yet ineffable influence over social and physical spaces. Together, these defined and abstract forces compose a hegemonic system of spatial producers that facilitates the deployment of strategies that order social and physical urban spaces in ways that maximize and maintain economic production for the dominant class.

Consider, for example, the role that a regulatory structure such as zoning plays in shaping urban spaces and affecting property values. A New York Times report found that “it is illegal on 75 percent of the residential land in many American cities to build anything other than a detached single-

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32 Soja, Seeking Spatial Justice, 19.
family home,” which limits the amount of housing that each city block can accommodate. When desirable spaces are zoned for lower residential density, they are available to fewer people. As such, these spaces become more expensive, meaning only those who have accumulated enough wealth can gain access to them. Studies show that the wealth gap in the United States is racially stratified—Blacks hold about 10 to 11 percent the amount of wealth as whites, contributing to racial and economic segregation of communities throughout U.S. cities. Restrictive zoning, along with city leaders and decision makers and the social norms, perceptions, and biases that hold restrictive zoning in place, represent a hegemonic system of defined and abstract spatial producers that hold significant power over the ways urban spaces develop.

Spatial producers typically shape and create spaces using formal development processes, which are underpinned by intention and logic that guide each development step and phase. Development processes embed spaces with “visual artifacts to be used or ‘read’” and they structure “encounter within the visual and material world.” In the same way that advertisers carefully compose advertisements using symbolic sights and sounds to convey meanings beyond any accompanying text or language, spatial producers strategically imbue urban spaces with symbols and signals that tell us what spaces are supposed to do and be, who and what they are for, and what users are supposed to do in and think about them. The symbols and signals relate to and build upon previous uses of the

37 “Mapping Segregation.”
same and similar symbols and signals to connote meanings and cue responses. Symbols and signals convey to spatial users directives such as: walk here, not there; turn here; go this way, not that way; this space is public; this space is private; you are welcome here, but not here; this space is valuable, this space is not. As spatial users, we are used to seeing such symbols and signals: crosswalks tell us where to cross streets; fences denote private spaces or spaces with unique uses; and carefully maintained streetscapes and rehabbed storefronts, made possible by the strategic investment of public and private resources, connote an array of possible interpretations about cultural, civic, and economic values.

Lefebvre says the dominant class makes decisions to suit its own interests. Because the dominant class comprises mostly white people and majority-white institutions, Lipsitz says the dominant class’s decisions about the shaping and creating of spaces are based on a “white spatial imaginary,” which envisions how spaces should be organized and used through a lens that is tinted by white experiences and tilted toward white supremacy. Zitcer says that the white spatial imaginary prompts a gentrifier to ask, “Where is the yoga studio? Where is the organic food co-op?” Zitcer describes how the dominant class brings “a set of class-informed assumptions, a ‘habitus’ that allows those with purchasing power to begin to reshape the environment to match their spatial imaginary.” Thus, spaces that the dominant class shapes and creates through formal development processes work to communicate and maintain the dominant class’s power.

41 Lefebvre, Production of Space.
44 Ibid., 4.
This line of thinking partly explains why some urban spaces, such as residential and commercial corridors, parks, and even entire neighborhoods, become targets for the dispersion of development resources, including financial incentives for private development and placemaking strategies that rebrand areas with new names and identities that convey certain sets of values and priorities.\textsuperscript{45} The values and priorities are often those of the dominant class. The dominant class has a highly homogenous membership whose values and priorities may not align with those of established users, resulting in an all-too-familiar pattern of gentrification that sets urban spaces on trajectories toward demographic changes and increased property values. This can—and often does—create upheavals in the social and physical spaces of those areas.\textsuperscript{46} Meanwhile, other urban spaces in the same city may continue to be neglected and left to decades-long trajectories of decline.\textsuperscript{47}

The processes used to shape and create urban spaces and the ways urban spaces look physically and feel psychologically as a result of development processes convey meanings to us—spatial users—which prompt and even coerce different perceptions and behaviors from us. However, the way we make sense of spaces is deeply subjective, as we instinctually and psychologically attempt to understand what we as individuals see and experience in spaces.\textsuperscript{48} To make sense of a space, we may

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{47} Jason Richardson, Bruce Mitchell, and Juan Franco, “Shifting Neighborhoods: Gentrification and Cultural Displacement in American Cities,” March 19, 2019, National Community Reinvestment Coalition, https://ncrc.org/gentrification/.
\item\textsuperscript{48} Lefebvre, Production of Space, 245; Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., The Visual Culture Reader (New York: Routledge, 2002). Walter Lefebvre calls for analyzing space via three approaches: spatial practice (the everyday lived experience in space); representation of space (the way space looks); and representational space (the way space “feels,” i.e. the instinctual or psychological responses space stimulates).
\end{itemize}
tap what is already familiar about it through our personal experiences as well as what we know about past policies and practices that have affected the space and present-day policies and practices that may be affecting it still.\textsuperscript{49} The same space can look and feel psychologically and physically different based on how it is being used and by whom and based on each user’s individual impressions of and reactions to the space. For example, a community meeting room may feel comfortable to a resident when it is filled with neighbors and when tables are arranged in a circular format that encourages open and collaborative dialogue. The same space, however, when filled with board members or city officials and arranged in a linear format that directs attention toward the front of the room, may feel stifling, uncomfortable, or unwelcoming to the same resident. At the same time, another resident may feel comfortable in both environments.

The research presented here responds to Soja’s call to cultivate “new areas of understanding and political practice.”\textsuperscript{50} It looks at development processes through residents’ perceptions about how development transforms their communities spatially, socially, politically, and economically. As spatial users, residents respond to urban spaces in unique ways, but city decision makers, who are also spatial users themselves but, more significantly, who are members of the dominant class and part of the hegemonic system of spatial producers, infrequently incorporate residents’ unique expertise and insights into development decisions in meaningful ways. Decision-making processes tend to be top-down and guided by spatial producers’ values and priorities.

My fieldwork in a disinvested neighborhood in Indianapolis illuminates how residents’ perceptions of development are based on their lived experiences. Residents who talked about their community’s needs and ideals being neglected by leaders conveyed perceptions of powerlessness in


\textsuperscript{50} Soja, \textit{Seeking Spatial Justice}, 5.
the shadow of well-resourced and well-networked outsiders newly focusing on development in the area. My research partly helps us understand why cookie-cutter development processes tend not to achieve equity and inclusion outcomes when they do not adequately probe and consider residents’ unique perspectives and contexts. Development does not alleviate the urban challenges it supposedly intends to address because development processes do not focus on maximizing freedoms, overcoming unfreedoms, and moving toward more inclusive social and physical urban spaces and equitable social and economic outcomes. This paper presents a case study that illustrates how the hegemonic system of spatial producers operates in ways that suit the values and priorities of the dominant class, which claims urban spaces and assumes leadership over processes that shape and create them.

CASE STUDY: THE POWER TO SHAPE AND CREATE URBAN SPACES

In her essay about race and racism in the United States generally and in Indianapolis specifically, Mari Evans describes what it is like to be excluded, or, in her words, “locked out” of living a full and free life. She says, “the subtleties and strategies of ‘locked out’ are easily read and the impact of them as psychologically harmful as they are physically limiting… ‘Locked out’ crushes the spirit and rechannels what could be positive creativity into negative creative acts.”\(^\text{51}\) She describes the ways the hegemonic system of spatial producers has shaped and created inequitable and exclusionary physical, social, and even mental spaces.

Throughout the essay, Evans never names a specific person who is part of the hegemonic system or who is solely responsible for creating inequitable and exclusionary spaces. This is because the power of the hegemonic system of spatial producers is, as Foucault describes, distributed across people, institutions, polices, practices, and “subtleties and strategies.”\(^\text{52}\) When this power concentrates


\(^{52}\) Foucault, “Subject and Power.”
in urban development processes, it enables the dominant class to discount and displace existing claims to urban spaces and assume leadership in processes that shape and create spaces. This case study examines how a grant that was made to transform a space at Riverside Regional Park in the Near Northwest Area of downtown Indianapolis may be viewed as a hegemonic mechanism for the dominant class to edge out existing residents and appropriate the space for use according to its own vision.

**METHODS AND BACKGROUND**

The information and comments presented here come from a qualitative study on perceptions of economic development. From January 2019 through October 2019, I conducted interviews and fieldwork in the Riverside neighborhood, which is one of several neighborhoods in the Near Northwest Area of downtown Indianapolis. I chose the Riverside neighborhood for this fieldwork because I wanted to hear perspectives on development from residents and other neighborhood folks living and working in a disinvested area that had not yet begun seeing the type of transformation that some other economically distressed neighborhoods near downtown had, but where some city funding and private market activity signaled that development may be on the horizon.

The most significant signal that development might be coming to Riverside was 16 Tech, a sixty-acre innovation district near the neighborhood’s southern border, where “researchers, entrepreneurs, and creative thinkers” will make “truly groundbreaking discoveries” in fields such as technology, biomedicine, and advanced manufacturing. The city of Indianapolis invested $75 million

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53 For example, from 2010 to 2018 assessed home values on the north, east, southeast, and south sides of downtown rose by 25%, 57%, 25%, and 73%, respectively. During the same time frame, assessed values on the near northwest side, where the Riverside neighborhood sits, decreased by 15%. Based on the author’s analysis using data from the Indiana Department of Local Government Finance, SAVI, www.SAVI.org (accessed June 10, 2020).

in tax incentives to support the development.\textsuperscript{55} Construction on the district’s first building broke ground in 2019 and the building opened in August 2020.\textsuperscript{56} In my fieldwork, I heard from district developers and Riverside residents that the Riverside neighborhood was expected to be a prime area where the district’s new employees will live because of its close proximity to both the district and downtown Indianapolis.

During my fieldwork period, I spoke with 47 people over the course of 42 interviews, attended 39 community meetings and events, and had innumerable informal conversations with people who lived and worked in the area. Out of the 47 people I interviewed, 15 were current Riverside residents and two were former residents who still owned the home where they grew up and were still involved in community activities. The majority of residents I interviewed were Black or people of color, while two were white. Nine of the people I interviewed worked at neighborhood organizations, such as a school, community center, or nonprofit organization focused on the Riverside neighborhood or the Near Northwest Area. Seven of those neighborhood folks were Black or people of color, while two were white. Throughout my research, I found that emotional ties to the neighborhood tended to run deep among many people who lived or worked there. For instance, one man, who lived elsewhere in the city but still owned his family home and was active in Riverside’s civic community, said, “My body is on the east side. My heart and soul’s on the west side.”

I also interviewed twenty-one people who worked at organizations with missions that directly or indirectly support economic or community development and with an operational reach that spans at least city-wide, if not to the broader central Indiana region. Examples of those organizations include the Office of the Mayor, City of Indianapolis Department of Metropolitan Development, EmployIndy, Indianapolis Metropolitan Police District, Indianapolis Neighborhood Housing

\textsuperscript{55} Davis, “Talent Attraction Key to City Innovation, Economic Growth at 16 Tech.”
\textsuperscript{56} 16 Tech Community Corporation.
Partnership, Indianapolis Neighborhood Resource Center, Indy Black Chamber, Indy Chamber, Local Initiatives Support Corporation. Of these twenty-one interviewees, two-thirds were white while the rest were Black or people of color. Interviewing people with varying levels of engagement in and knowledge of the Riverside neighborhood—from city leaders who spent little to no time there to residents who lived there—gave me insights into a variety of perspectives about how they saw the Riverside neighborhood changing.

The area we know today as Riverside is a historically industrial neighborhood situated within three miles of the central business district in downtown Indianapolis. It was mostly a farming community until modern industrial development began around the turn of the twentieth century. In 1892, a cerealine mill, called Cerealine Manufacturing Company, seeking to cut costs, moved from Columbus, Indiana, to the present-day site of the Bunge soybean plant on 18th Street between Gent and Montcalm Streets in the southeastern quadrant of the Riverside neighborhood. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the area was populated by mostly white working- and middle-class residents, the majority of whom lived in single-family homes while some lived in multi-family buildings. There were retail and entertainment venues, doctor’s offices, grocery stores, pharmacies, schools, libraries, fire stations, service stations, transit lines, and all the other services typical of a thriving community. However, as with many urban neighborhoods around the country, mid-twentieth-century white flight to the suburbs, in addition to racially discriminatory policies and

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58 Sharon Kennedy, Memories of Cerealine Towne (Indianapolis: Published by the author, 2000), 20. Cerealine is a flaked corn product. The Indiana Historical Bureau calls cerealine “a precursor to cold breakfast cereal” and says brewers have also used it “as a malt alternative” (“Cerealine Manufacturing Co.,” n.d., https://www.in.gov/history/markers/4094.htm). Hominy is also a corn-based product that, once processed, can be eaten alone or can be ground into grits or into a finer texture and used like flour.
59 Kennedy, Memories of Cerealine Towne.
60 Ibid. In interviews, residents also talked about businesses and amenities that used to exist in the area.
practices, such as redlining, led to residential and commercial disinvestment and hindered reinvestment in and around Riverside.\textsuperscript{61}

Today, Riverside is part of a broader area called the Near Northwest Area, comprising approximately 10,700 residents. Riverside is the largest neighborhood in the area, comprising about 3,000 to 5,500 residents, depending on how one defines the neighborhood’s boundaries.\textsuperscript{62} In interviews and during fieldwork, I heard residents and neighborhood folks describe Riverside’s boundaries spanning from 30th Street to the north to one of three southern edges: 16th Street, Fall Creek, or 10th Street; and then from White River to the west to one of three eastern edges: the Central Canal, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Street, or I-65.

Within the smallest neighborhood boundaries described by residents, Riverside’s population is approximately 74.9% Black, 17% white, 7.8% Latinx, and .4% Asian; expanding the neighborhood to its broadest described boundaries changes the distribution to approximately 75.7 percent Black, 13.1 percent white, 5.7 percent Latinx, and 2.4 percent Asian. Regardless of how one draws the boundaries, poverty and unemployment in the area are high at about 40 percent and 17.5 percent, respectively, but the population is not homogenous.\textsuperscript{63} Poverty and unemployment in the area are high at 24 percent and 17.5 percent, respectively,\textsuperscript{64} but the population is not homogenous. There are working-class residents, residents of some affluence, many senior citizens, and families with children of all ages. An active civic community partners with city entities and nonprofit organizations to address the area’s challenges with vacancy, housing instability, poverty, and unemployment. One of the most active neighborhood groups is the Riverside Civic League, which I was told is the second-oldest

\textsuperscript{61} For a detailed case study of how white flight and racially discriminatory policies and practices affected Detroit, see Thomas J. Sugrue, \textit{The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
neighborhood association in Indianapolis, although no one in the area seems to know which is the oldest, and, to date, I have also not been able to ascertain that information.

At the February 2019 Riverside Civic League meeting, I formally introduced myself to the community. When it was my turn on the meeting agenda, I stood at the front of the room and summarized who I was personally (a wife, mother of three, and graduate student), briefly pitched my research project, and asked people to sign up to interview with me, which a few people did. I knew, however, that I would have to work harder at getting people to sit down and talk with me. Being aware of my position as an affluent, well-educated white woman with ties to a university about which many residents did not have warm feelings, I knew it was necessary to show my commitment to learning from people in the community by regularly showing up to meetings and events, especially when personally invited, listening carefully to what residents’ concerns were, working to understand the deeper roots of those concerns, talking openly and authentically about race and power, and acknowledging my inherent privilege as a white person. I made a point to regularly reiterate what I thought I was hearing from people to make sure I was understanding their perceptions accurately and ensure I was not making inappropriate assumptions. I also tried to share my research process with residents as much as possible. For example, whenever I interviewed someone, I gave them a copy of the transcript to convey that the conversation was not merely “my data” but something that was meaningfully co-produced, and thus ownership of it was shared between the interviewee and me.66


66 This philosophy came from my training in oral history methods that stresses new knowledge as co-created between researchers and participants and that emphasizes the use of oral histories to connect people’s past experiences to present values and beliefs. See Marjorie Hunt, The Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, 2010).
RIVERSIDE REGIONAL PARK

In 1898, less than a decade after the cerealine mill opened in the area, Indianapolis mayor Thomas Taggart established Riverside Regional Park, which, today, is an 862-acre municipal park, one of the largest public parks in the country. The park spans from its northern border along 38th Street south to 18th Street and encompasses land on both sides of White River. It makes up the western boundary of the Riverside neighborhood. Over the years, park amenities have included swimming, fishing, canoeing, shelter areas for gatherings, playgrounds, a soap box derby hill (which turns into a sledding hill during snowy winters), all kinds of classes for people of all ages, and sports (including football, soccer, baseball, softball, basketball, boxing, tennis, and, most notably, golf). Riverside Regional Park includes three eighteen-hole golf courses and a golf academy, which features its own nine-hole, par 3 course, all dating back to the turn of the twentieth century.

At the heart of the park is an area known as “Riverside Park Proper,” which marks the historic entrance to the park. This space includes a large but dilapidated Romanesque-style memorial, which was dedicated to Mayor Taggart in 1931. The space also includes playgrounds, an outdoor aquatic center, and the Riverside Family Center, which houses Indianapolis Parks and Recreation Department staff offices, meeting rooms, a gymnasium, a workout room, locker rooms, and a large, open room called the Auditorium. Today, the Auditorium serves as an event and meeting area, but it housed an indoor swimming pool from about the late 1960s until the mid-1990s.

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68 Riverside Regional Park Master Plan, 9–26.
69 Ibid., 15–17.
70 Ibid.
71 To date, I have been unable to pinpoint the exact years when the indoor swimming pool at Riverside Regional Park opened and closed, but newspaper articles from the Indianapolis Star and Indianapolis Recorder have referenced active use of the indoor pool during this time period.
Riverside Regional Park is managed by Indianapolis Parks and Recreation Department ("Indy Parks Department"), which is a city department that manages public parks, trails, and other recreation spaces through the city and county. Throughout its more than 120-year history, Riverside Regional Park has been an anchor in many residents’ daily lives in the area. One former resident, a middle-aged Black man who grew up learning to box at the park, said, “this place saved me.” Neighborhood kids spend after-school hours and summers at the park and aquatic center, and adults and families go there for classes, community meetings, and events year-round. Life for many people in the Near Northwest Area revolves around Riverside Regional Park.

In 2017, the Indy Parks Department, along with partners, stakeholders, and residents, underwent an in-depth master planning process to reimagine the entire park. Many of the park’s facilities and amenities are in a state of disrepair due to lack of investment and adequate maintenance over many years. The estimated cost of implementing the master plan in its entirety was $118 million when the plan was created, although most people seemed to simply round that estimate up to $120 million and even to $130 million, since costs will likely inflate over the course of the projected ten-to-twenty-year timeline needed to realize the master plan.

In December 2018, plans for the park got a lift when Indianapolis-based philanthropy Lilly Endowment granted more than $9 million to repair the dilapidated Taggart Memorial, build an outdoor amphitheater that will use the memorial as a backdrop and stage, and provide support to make the Indianapolis Shakespeare Company the space’s anchoring organization. This funding was a substantial contribution toward the implementation of the $120 million master plan. The windfall funding came as a surprise to area residents, some of whom had worked for years trying to generate

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72 Riverside Regional Park Master Plan.
support for repairing the Taggart Memorial as part of a task force initiative with Indiana Landmarks, a nonprofit organization that strives to preserve historically significant buildings and sites around the state. The task force’s calls for funds to repair the Taggart Memorial went unanswered, and the site was eventually added to Indiana Landmarks’ list of most endangered historic sites. In 2018, after the Lilly Endowment announced that it would be awarding millions of dollars through a new Arts and Cultural Innovation grant, Indianapolis Parks Foundation, the Indianapolis Shakespeare Company, and Indiana Landmarks partnered together and received a $9.24 million grant.

While residents and neighborhood folks I talked to and encountered during fieldwork seemed mostly eager for the park to finally receive the attention it needs and deserves, I also noticed skepticism about processes being used to bring the master plan implementation to fruition. Many residents, feeling pushed around and sidestepped at times, expressed fear about what new attention on the park from outsiders may be signaling about the future of the communities surrounding the park. Residents expressed the sense that development efforts led by powerful and well-resourced outsiders were seeking to capitalize on the area’s assets, including its proximity to the city center, new schools, many churches, active civic life, and, significantly, Riverside Regional Park.

FINDINGS

When I started fieldwork in the Riverside neighborhood in January 2019, I assumed Riverside residents had been engaged in designing the proposal for the funds the Lilly Endowment granted to repair and activate the Taggart Memorial, but I learned that had not been the case. The endowment’s website says the plans outlined in the grant application for the Taggart Memorial were “grounded in

75 Indianapolis Parks Foundation is a nonprofit entity whose mission is to develop and sustain the public parks, trails, and green spaces that are managed by Indianapolis Parks and Recreation Department.
the visionary masterplan for Riverside Regional Park.”76 Indeed, the park plan, which was produced over the course of several months and includes input from Riverside and Near Northwest Area residents, calls for the Taggart Memorial to be transformed into a performance venue.77 In my fieldwork, however, I heard residents and folks who work in the neighborhood express sentiments of starting to feel “locked out” of the park due to the exclusionary nature by which the grant funds were secured. One woman who had been working in the neighborhood for more than fifteen years told me:

[The task force] really worked hard at [getting the memorial restored], and once [the grant] came to fruition, you know, some of the members were a little bit irritated because they didn’t know about this, and that recognition wasn’t given up front, that, you know, Hey, we’ve put in a lot of effort and time on this to get this restored, and, you know, you guys just walk in and, like, have this money, and not even giving us…any kind of credit for it.

A long-time resident who grew up in the neighborhood expressed skepticism about how the grant came about and wondered why the foundational programmatic funding supported Shakespeare performances, which she seemed to see as irrelevant and unrelatable. She wanted to see programming geared more specifically toward Black audiences, which she referred to as “the inner city” and who, for the last few decades, had been the primary users of the spaces surrounding the memorial:

Resident: Lilly had a grant, from what I understood, and they [the outside organizations] just wrote in and got the grant. Now, they said they’re supposed to do other things there, like, uh, Freetown Village.78 I don’t know. They’re supposed to do that, but that is going to be something I’m really gonna push.

Abbey: Yeah?

Resident: You know, I’m not saying that the inner city don’t like Shakespeare, but, come on. Most people don’t like Shakespeare… I mean, it’s just, like, You give a grant for that and you have this Freetown Village where they do readings and they put on plays and… Why couldn’t that grant have gone to them? But, as I’ve just said, they’re supposed to use it for multiple things, so we’ll see.

77 Riverside Regional Park Master Plan.
Both these interviewees seemed to see a problem with groups of people and institutions that were not part of the community who typically used the park receiving this large grant, excluding community members in the decision to apply for the grant, and making the space the Indianapolis Shakespeare Company’s home base. One resident, who participated in the master-planning process, expressed a sense of having been duped. She said, “On all of those boards that they had at those different meetings, I never heard one time somebody go, You know what we’re not getting enough of? Shakespeare”

Prior to the grant, residents seemed to feel some sense of duty toward this publicly owned space, which was part of what motivated some of them to help establish a task force to work toward repairing it. Because they perceived it being part of their neighborhood and because it was something many of them encountered on a near daily basis, they seemed to feel that it was their responsibility to care for it as a public memorial, especially when it seemed like no one else was paying attention to it. It is easy to imagine they might have felt that, because they cared enough to spend time and effort actively pursuing the memorial’s preservation, they might have earned the opportunity to influence what would happen there. Through the grant, however, a group of predominantly white outside entities, all of which are private nonprofit organizations, was able to take control of the public space (although the space’s purpose was not theirs to determine), while saying they were meeting the desires of residents in the surrounding communities. These residents had expressed the desire to have the Taggart Memorial repaired and transformed into a performance space, although not necessarily to be the home of Shakespeare plays. By leveraging and connecting their social and economic capital, outsiders were able to bring to fruition a privately held vision of having Shakespeare performances at the Taggart Memorial, a publicly owned space, without meaningfully including residents in development processes.
While those who wrote for the grant did not consult with residents during the proposal-writing process, resident engagement began in earnest after the partners received the grant, likely to gain resident buy-in to help ensure successful grant implementation. For instance, representatives from Indy Parks Department and Foundation and the Indianapolis Shakespeare Company started regularly appearing on community meeting agendas to give updates and solicit participation in their own meetings and events. Additionally, Indy Parks Department and Foundation staff and Indianapolis Shakespeare Company representatives requested suggestions from residents in programming over fifty free community days. Suggestions included performances by students from area schools, the Riverside High School graduation ceremony, a jazz festival and other types of musical events, and, of course, Freetown Village events. No grant dollars will be dedicated to community performances and events aside from the in-kind donation of the space. Outside of these free community days, individuals and organizations that want to use the space must pay a fee to rent it.

In an interview that took place after the grant was awarded, a representative from one of the organizations that submitted the proposal said it was “up to us to figure out how we fit into the fabric of the Riverside neighborhood and how we connect with people in ways that support what is already there arts-wise and add to it.”79 While there is friendly sentiment in this statement, and it is good that the speaker recognizes the importance of community engagement, a sentiment of entitlement and privilege also exists. Indeed, residents were actively engaged in helping program the space, but that importance was expressed only after control over the Taggart Memorial space was established and a framework for programming it was designed. Community engagement was apparently not a priority during the process of making decisions about whether the grant was a good fit for the Taggart

Memorial or the communities of people who had been the primary users of the spaces around it. Instead, that decision was made by more powerful outsiders.

When I attended community meetings, I heard a lot of positivity about changes that were coming not only to the Taggart Memorial space but also to Riverside Regional Park generally. People were open to changes and wanted to welcome resources that could help with their goals to enhance quality of life and place in Riverside and the Near Northwest Area, but they wanted to be meaningfully included in decision-making processes. In interviews, residents conveyed a sense of skepticism about whether coming changes would benefit current residents. In response to my question about what she thought of the park master plan, one senior citizen, who had been living in the area for almost sixty years, said, “I think it’s great that they’re going to improve a lot,” but then she quickly added, “what people are afraid of is that they’re gonna be pushed out.” She said people at the senior workout classes she attended nearby talked about this. She said people were always concerned that things will be improved for “somebody else.” I probed this line of thinking, trying to understand her own perceptions:

Abbey: You don’t see that, though?
Resident: It’s not gonna be for us. You know, but, I say, Go to the meetings and find out. I always say, Go to the meetings and put your input in. You know? If they don’t know what you want, sometimes they can’t give you what you want.

Abbey: Sure, that makes sense. So, you don’t really see that there’s a risk that it wouldn’t be improved for people who live here?
Resident: Well, I’m just kind-of iffy now. I need to see, you know? Because you just have to wait and see, because there’s a lot of people right now that are feeling like it’s not gonna be…that they’re gonna fix it up for somebody else.

While she thought it was good that resources were being dedicated to the park, she was uncertain about whether current residents would benefit from the improvements. During our conversation, she said residents feared inequitable development would take over the Riverside area and lead to gentrification and displacement as they perceived development had done in other parts of the city.
The same resident who wanted to see Freetown Village programmed at the Taggart Memorial connected changes at Riverside Regional Park with neighborhood transformation that is strategically intended to benefit people other than current Riverside residents:

The whole, like, where they’re gonna redo Riverside, that whole master plan is…the master plan. People want quick access to downtown. It’s a perfect location. The park, the golf course right there, downtown, the highway. No matter which way you go. I mean, it’s a perfect location, and that’s what they, you know, since that’s the trend now, to come back [to the inner city], they’ve already…they’ve saturated downtown, so, now it’s branching out.

This resident said the trend of people wanting to live in urban neighborhoods was “branching out,” as if it was an unstoppable force, seeping outward from the city center with the inevitability of a viral outbreak. During an interview with a middle-aged man who used to live in the neighborhood and still owns his family home, I heard him speak in a similar way. I asked him if he thought residents had any power to reshape neighborhood transformation they perceived as being exclusionary so it would benefit residents, and he said, “The attitude is, They’re gonna do it anyway. You can’t stop it.”

Residents recognized Riverside Regional Park and the Taggart Memorial as unique features in the area, and they expressed fear that powerful, well-resourced outsiders were seeing these features as desirable assets they wanted to control. Residents expressed concern that these outsiders were encroaching on the area and beginning processes of slowly staking claim over its social and physical spaces, edging residents out and taking control over processes to shape spaces for their own purposes. When residents, especially those from historically disenfranchised populations and geographies, perceived that development processes were being planned without them and implemented with little to no feedback from them, they were inclined to believe those processes were purposely exclusionary and that any benefits from development were explicitly or implicitly not for them. They believed the full benefits of development would not reach them because they felt like they had not been meaningfully included in decision-making processes and because, historically, the people who have reaped the most rewards from development have been decision makers.
Interestingly, when interviewees talked about these seemingly unstoppable, exclusionary development processes, they typically did not pinpoint a specific person or entity driving the processes or explicitly responsible for creating the exclusionary conditions. Even regarding the Lilly grant and the Taggart Memorial, residents did not seem to hold the Indianapolis Shakespeare Company, the Indy Parks Department, the Indy Parks Foundation, or Indiana Landmarks solely responsible for creating conditions that felt exclusionary. In interviews, residents often referred to an ambiguous “they” when talking about who controlled development, such as the woman who said the trend of people wanting to live in urban neighborhoods is “branching out,” when she said, “they’ve saturated downtown.” Another resident referred to “the powers that be” when talking about who drives development.

Sometimes residents talked about “the city” and its involvement in creating conditions that felt exclusionary, but, even then, they usually spoke in general terms rather than holding a specific city department or person, such as the mayor, accountable. For instance, a pastor described how the neighborhood infrastructure was not well maintained, saying that repairs made to sidewalks and roads were only done in sections rather than holistically, thus the patchily repaired surfaces seemed to deteriorate again too quickly. However, he did not attribute the lack of maintenance or patchwork repairs to the City of Indianapolis Department of Public Works, which does these types of repairs. He spoke in general terms, referring to an ambiguous “they” when he said, “We’re looked at as a commodity to be sold, not a community to be invested in, and they don’t do that anyplace else…They don’t care. They’re just waiting to move us out.” The consistently poor condition of the neighborhood’s infrastructure signaled to him that there was something working against the Riverside community, but the source of that antagonism was not a single individual or entity.

When residents spoke in these general terms, using an ambiguous “they” to talk about a powerful, seemingly unstoppable force they felt was working to displace them or infringe on their
freedom to shape the social and physical spaces in their neighborhood, they were signifying the hegemonic system of spatial producers. Because the hegemonic system’s power is distributed, and not held within a specific individual or entity, pinpointing where the power is coming from can be difficult, and, therefore, so can holding individuals and entities accountable. For example, in the case of the Lilly grant to the Taggart Memorial, who should be held accountable for the exclusion residents said they experienced? Should the granting entity be held accountable for not requiring more thorough community engagement and more community representation on the submitted grant proposal? Should the entities that wrote the grant be held accountable for not engaging residents in their process? Should the city be held accountable for letting the Taggart Memorial fall into such a state of disrepair that only a windfall of funding from a private entity could save it?

Not only did residents seem to feel powerless in the shadow of the hegemonic system of spatial producers but they also seemed to see the hegemonic system through a racialized lens. Interviewees talked about “white people” to signify their perception that the hegemonic system comprised mostly of individuals and entities that were white, informed by white experiences, or seeking to manifest a white spatial imaginary. One resident, choosing his words with intention, conveyed this when we were talking about who had the ability to increase outside investment in the neighborhood:

Abbey: Who do you think…you said “they,” is that…who would that be?
Resident: In terms of attracting resources?
Abbey: Yeah. You said something about “they would…” um…
Resident: Yeah, so, people with buying power, um, so, white people. People in positions of power, um, in different institutions, whether they be nonprofit institutions or, um, institutions that lend money or, um…educational institutions… So, basically the, um, elite that…can reshape neighborhoods as they see fit.

Another resident said something similar when I asked her how the neighborhood is changing: “It’s more of…an ‘us’ and ‘them’…what’s happening now transition-wise. I know you’ve heard about the gentrification type of thing…?” I confirmed that I had, and she continued, “And so, now there’s a lot
of push and pull from residents and outsiders that the neighborhood’s being taken over by white people."

While residents did not pinpoint specific entities they were holding accountable for excluding them from development in the neighborhood, they connected what they were seeing and experiencing in development processes to the racialized ways other institutional processes led by the dominant class, such as redlining, have hindered people of color from building the individual and community wealth that would enable them to pursue things they have reason to value. Residents perceived exclusion in development processes to be yet another mechanism, in a long and historic list of mechanisms, that infringes on their freedoms. When no individual or entity can be held accountable for excluding residents, it can be difficult to know where and how to deploy solutions, and so the hegemonic system that “locks out” people from participating in processes that shape and create social and physical spaces is allowed to perpetuate, and exclusion continues.

In the case of the Lilly grant to the Taggart Memorial, powerful, well-networked, mostly white outsiders made the decision to apply for the grant without including residents in decision-making processes, and the grant was awarded in part to make the memorial home to an organization that had no prior history with the park or the surrounding communities whose residents had been, for decades, the primary users of the spaces surrounding the Taggart Memorial. The grant writers justified their actions by saying they were responding to what residents said they wanted, but residents, not having been included in decisions about the grant, interpreted the process used by the well-connected outside entities to be exclusionary. Residents saw the process as a mechanism for staking claim to the space and taking control over its shaping. Residents perceived the grant to be a sign that the mostly white

dominant class was turning its attention onto Riverside Regional Park. They interpreted the grant as a signal that an unstoppable force was seeping into the Riverside neighborhood, and that exclusionary development processes, such as the one used to secure the Lilly grant for the Taggart Memorial, would continue to shape and create social and physical spaces in their neighborhood according to a white vision of what the neighborhood’s spaces should be. Residents expressed worry that, eventually, they would be entirely sidestepped, edged out, discounted, and displaced, left without any power or the freedom to shape and create social and physical spaces throughout their communities.

REIMAGING DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES: AUDITING FOR INCLUSION

To shift the imbalance of power that shapes urban spaces, create more inclusive social and physical urban spaces, and achieve more equitable social and economic goals, we must follow Soja’s advice and develop “new areas of understanding and political practice.” As Harvey says, we must closely examine decision-making processes that shape and create spaces to understand not only who and what is involved in development processes, but also how spatial users perceive those processes and how their outcomes affect them and their ability to shape and create the kinds of social and physical urban spaces they value. Spatial users need to be included in decision-making processes if development is going to achieve goals relating to equity and inclusion.

Cheryl Harris wrote a revealing essay that helps us understand how equity is not possible without inclusion. Her essay exposes how the U.S. legal system has promoted exclusion and segregation using scales, based on standards of whiteness and white experiences, to unfairly decide legal cases, resulting in the systemic protection and upholding of white interests and experiences and a “legacy of oppression” affecting people of color. The legal system is both a part of and an entity

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81 Soja, Seeking Spatial Justice, 5.
that shapes and perpetuates the hegemonic system of spatial producers. Harris argues that the U.S. legal system should apply “equalizing treatment” to people and cases, rather than equal treatment, to eradicate systemic segregation and exclusion (emphasis in the original).\textsuperscript{84} Harris explains that “the meaning of equalizing treatment would vary, because the extent of privilege and subordination is not constant with reference to all societal goods,” thus there cannot be a “one size fits all” approach, and each case must be considered individually.\textsuperscript{85} Her argument for equalizing treatment shifts the perspective about what is good, fair, or equitable, toward individual users, much like Sen’s definition of freedom. Thus, solutions must consider each individual’s unique contexts, needs, abilities, and values.

It is reasonable to assume that, to tailor strategies, interventions, solutions, and opportunities to individuals’ unique contexts and values, those individuals must be included in decision-making processes. Decision makers, however, guided by dominant social norms, perceptions, and biases and operating in alignment with their own values and priorities, or those of the institutions they represent, may be blind to the ways their processes are exclusionary. For example, in the case of the Lilly grant to the Taggart Memorial, decision makers likely thought they were being inclusive by allowing fifty free community days and enabling residents to help program those days. They did not realize they baked exclusion and inequity into the process, and thus the space, when they wrote for the grant without including residents. Residents, perceiving that development processes are both exclusionary and unstoppable and that power dynamics between themselves and decision makers are too imbalanced to equalize, may feel they have little to no ability to influence development. As a result, development processes continue to be shaped by powerful, well-networked decision makers, and

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 1780.  
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.
residents continue being left out entirely or included only in tokenistic ways, such as being allowed to help program free community days.

What could help in this situation is what I call a neutral third perspective, inspired by Derek Hyra’s study on gentrification. In his ethnography of a neighborhood in Washington, D.C., Hyra describes how gentrification turned a low-income, predominantly Black area into an ethnically and economically diverse neighborhood, but social integration among existing residents and newcomers did not happen.\footnote{Hyra, Race, Class, and Politics in the Cappuccino City.} He says the neighborhood’s social dynamics maintained a level of microsegregation that resulted in the wealthier—and typically whiter—newcomers replacing existing residents, not necessarily physically, but \emph{politically}. He explains that, although existing residents and new residents lived next door to one another, they either did not build meaningful relationships with one another or they held perspectives, interests, tastes, and values that were vastly different from one another. Hyra found that, because at least some of these newcomers had more social and political capital, in addition to economic capital, existing residents lost their ability to influence decisions about the neighborhood, such as how to transform a publicly owned, underutilized green space.\footnote{Ibid., 140–41.} While they may not get displaced physically, existing residents get displaced politically and culturally in too many urban development processes.

Hyra’s solution to this problem is what he calls “third spaces,” which are places in neighborhoods that provide opportunities for bridging gaps in the relationships between existing residents and newcomers.\footnote{Ibid., 160.} He describes third spaces as neutral places “where people feel comfortable speaking about difference and inequalities, and work through these challenging issues through shared activities that cut across differences.”\footnote{Ibid.} He identifies “corner stores, coffee shops, bars, bookstores,
and eating establishments” as places where these conversations can happen. What he describes are places where agonistic struggles can play out, and thus residents and others who may participate in these spaces can build understanding of and appreciation for another’s perspectives and find common values.

In the case of development decision making, where processes that shape and create urban spaces are inequitably designed to suit the values and priorities of the dominant class, further disenfranchising already disenfranchised residents, I would go one step further than Hyra and say that agonistic struggles can and should be actively initiated by a neutral third perspective. Such a perspective can audit development processes and be a conduit of knowledge building between historically disenfranchised populations and geographies and the hegemonic system of spatial producers, which defaults to creating exclusionary and inequitable conditions. Carefully auditing development processes can assess the extent to which residents feel invited or welcomed to offer agonistic perspectives or feel excluded from doing so. An audit can investigate: Do residents perceive that they have the freedom to exert their agency in development decision making or do they perceive that processes are closed to them? To what extent are processes actually closed to residents because they are happening behind closed doors or within closed networks? Do residents perceive their efforts to exert their agency will be effective, or do they perceive that development is unstoppable?

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90 Ibid.
91 Michel Foucault says that, because people are self-determining agents, there is a power struggle and thus an agonistic relationship between them where both seek freedoms simultaneously. He calls the agonistic relationship one that is both “reciprocal incitation and struggle, less of face-to-face confrontation which paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation.” See Foucault, “Subject and Power,” 790.
92 The idea of an audit was inspired, in part, by Nuno Sacramento and Claudia Zeiske, ARTocracy: Art, Informal Space and Social Consequence, A Curatorial Handbook in Collaborative Practice (Berlin: JOVIS Verlag, 2011). In this book, the authors outline an approach to collaborative art practices. Their approach includes a cultural audit. The cultural audit is a broad snapshot of the qualitative and quantitative components that compose and contribute to a community, including geography and climate, demographic makeup, community assets, where people go when they finish school, professional opportunities for young people, voting patterns, government, transportation, and much more. The idea of an audit also comes from equity audits conducted in schools “as a way of determining the degree of compliance with a number of civil rights activities receiving federal funding.” Susan L. Groenke, “Seeing, Inquiring, Witnessing: Using the Equity Audit in Practitioner Inquiry to Rethink Inequity in Public Schools,” English Education 43, no. 1 (2010): 83–96, esp. 87.
A neutral third perspective can help answer these questions by using research methodologies that can assess perceived and real needs and abilities from many angles using on-the-ground approaches that gather quantitative data, qualitative insights, and expertise from residents, contextualized by their lived experiences. For example, city leaders can use an auditing process to understand Black residents’ experiences with institutional racism and apply that knowledge as they assess how, when, and why they use tax dollars to incentivize development. A community development corporation can use an auditing process to understand perspectives among residents who are not active participants in the community, using that information to obtain a more well-rounded vision of the type of future residents want for the area. Finally, as described in the case study presented here, a philanthropic organization can use an audit to change how it designs grant proposal processes to ensure they include individuals who will be affected by grant-funded activities.

The audit can be carried out by an embedded researcher who builds authentic, trusting relationships with residents, practitioners, and any other parties involved, recording perspectives that are common, popular, unpopular, and unexpected. The research can begin as soon as development processes originate and continue indefinitely, or until the development project is complete. The researcher can provide necessary timely feedback that can be used to iterate processes and enable course correction as needed. Various participatory methodologies, such as community-based participatory research (CBPR) and participatory action research (PAR), which emphasize individual expertise and value co-creation of knowledge, offer both cautionary advice and guidance on how to

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94 Feldman and Lowe, “Evidence-Based Economic Development Policy.”

carefully navigate political and cultural dynamics to draw input from as many people as possible. Individuals and organizations, including city departments, nonprofit entities, and philanthropies, dedicated to equity and inclusion can initially invest in this research. Over time, their practices will create new social norms where this research would be an expected component of development processes.

The case study presented here illustrates how development can operate in exclusionary and inequitable ways, infringing on people’s abilities to shape and create social and physical spaces they value and perpetuating the imbalance of power that prevents development from solving urban challenges. If we want different social relations—that is, if we want development processes to maximize freedoms and overcome unfreedoms, we must design different ways of producing urban spaces. We must move away from neoliberal tendencies that enable wealth to pool at the top of the socioeconomic spectrum and instead move toward shaping and creating more inclusive social and physical urban spaces that will lead to more equitable social and economic outcomes. The hegemonic system of spatial producers must be disrupted and dismantled, and the processes of spatial production rebuilt. Closely examining development processes and creating mechanisms that can empower spatial users to incorporate their perceptions and experiences into decision-making processes so they can help build social and physical urban spaces that are equitable and inclusive can help facilitate freedom, enabling people to pursue the things they have reason to value.

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INTRODUCTION

Within this paper we consider the possibilities for decentering whiteness as the default norm, including through curricular changes in higher education. Specifically, we take up the following questions: Who is freely able and, conversely, unable to exercise the right to make, remake, and revise? Moreover, whose stories are being told and preserved for future generations? Using an autoethnographic analysis, we address these questions by discussing the complexities of relaunching and attempting to enrich the African American Studies program at a Predominately White Institution (PWI) of higher education.

The narrative reflections presented in this paper were composed by the Director of the African American Studies program who self-identifies as Black female and the Assistant Director who self-identifies as a cisgender woman of European descent. An autoethnographic approach combines characteristics of ethnography and autobiography, thereby allowing individuals to explore cultural understanding through self-observation as participants in the research. Moreover, such an approach requires the researchers to reflect on and question their experiences in the context of the reality in

which they live. For this paper, this approach is especially beneficial insofar as our goal is to explore our lived Black and white experiences of working together to maintain and expand an African American Studies program within an institution of higher education. These distinctions have also informed the attendant struggles we face when striving to dismantle Eurocentric modes of thought. In the conclusion of the essay, we reflect on the importance of documenting and sharing our lived experiences so that they might provide guidance for current and future scholar-teachers working on behalf of systemic change in higher education and beyond.

While this paper was written with publication in a particular journal in mind, we had already been considering writing about our time as a director and an assistant director of African American Studies at a PWI. We imagined that the obstacles and rewards of our distinct but overlapping experiences might be of interest to our colleagues laboring on behalf of African American Studies, both at other institutions of higher education and in other educational and activist settings, especially those with majority white populations. Thus, when we received a special call for papers that addressed issues of power in the context of social change, we felt that our experiences leading the African American Studies program would fit nicely with that theme. Accordingly, we took the following steps to compose this autoethnographic essay: we met to discuss our individual and collective goals; we completed writing our personal narratives alone; we came together to synthesize our experiences as director and assistant director; and, for the purposes of the paper, we attempted to meld our two voices into one, much as we have done in our leadership of an African American Studies program. At each stage, we considered the possible repercussions of sharing our truths. In the end, we concluded that our individual and collective stories may shed needed light on the barriers that women of color face when working to develop African American Studies programs in particular and to decenter whiteness in general. As Audre Lorde avers in her incisive essay “The Transformation of Silence into

97 Ibid., 2.
Language and Action,” “It is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.” Here, we try to break the silence in hopes that people who identify as being marginal within the walls of higher education will read this and recognize that they are not alone in finding a place and space to articulate their voices. We also hope allies and accomplices in social justice work will recognize the necessity (not to mention the complexities) of empowering marginalized voices and Afro-centric modes of thought.

COMING TOGETHER

Before mapping out the context of our own efforts to remake our university into a site where African American Studies is not just included in the curriculum but also valued as a worldview, let us offer a brief overview of the primary objectives of this field of study. As Ibram X. Kendi (formerly Ibram H. Rogers) details, in the late 1960s Black campus activists demanded the adoption of curricula focused on the Black experience, the hiring of professors and administrators who shared their backgrounds and experiences, and ultimately an overhaul of white-centric ideologies and norms. These activists, Kendi argues, “did not succeed in revolutionizing higher education. However, they did succeed in shoving to the center a series of historically marginalized academic ideas, questions, frames, methods, perspectives, subjects, and pursuits.” Kendi concludes that Black campus activists “forced the rewriting of the racial constitution of higher education,” thereby institutionalizing African American Studies as an academic discipline. This push for institutionalizing culminated with the creation of the first doctoral program in Black Studies at Temple University in 1988. This field has

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100 Ibid.
been instrumental in reorienting the focus of higher education from an almost exclusively Eurocentric curriculum to one which centralizes the undeniable significance of African Diasporic people to our national narratives. In the words of the eminent scholars James Stewart and Talmadge Anderson,

African American Studies emphasizes the study of the effects and implications of racism, inequality, and injustice on the historical and contemporary life chances of Black people. It directly attacks the casual, slight, and often stereotypical treatment of Blacks that negatively affects the social psychology of African American students in educational curricula and textbooks. African American Studies also enhances the education of White students [and non-Black students of color] by neutralizing the omission, distortion, and depreciation of the role and contributions of Black Americans that instill and sustain false notions of White supremacy and European preeminence.  

In African American Studies, Euro-American figures and ways of knowing are not erased, but they are not cast in the central roles that they have historically occupied in American institutions of higher education.

Moreover, as Erica R. Edwards, Roderick A. Ferguson, and Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar point out, the contemporary African American Studies landscape is marked by exigent “conditions of possibility—or rather, conditions of necessity,” including—

the flowering of both local and national social and political movements addressing the evisceration of Black lives by carceral and surveilling apparatuses, the resurgence of overt white supremacy, the decrease in resources devoted to Black studies on many campuses and the opposite (the dramatic increase in resources devoted to the programming and hiring in Black studies) on others, the meteoric rise in both the velocity at which knowledge in the field is produced and the sheer number of sites for that knowledge production on the Internet and in public spaces.  

In other words, this is a crucial juncture, both on and off college and university campuses, for fostering the wide-ranging research, coursework, and community-engaged activities that constitute African American Studies.

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We recognize both the necessities and the possibilities engendered by these sociocultural and political circumstances; however, the African American Studies program that we administer has had a history of ebb and flow at our university, and has never functioned as a standalone department. Instead, it has been available to students as a minor with classes taught in various departments to support the program, and typically one tireless faculty member has been at the helm until she or he retires or leaves the university. These patterns have also contributed to the lack of documented historical data regarding how the program has been maintained. It is our understanding that, until 2010, our university had an active African American Studies program. Its absence from campus between 2010 and 2016 was felt. In Fall 2017, our former colleague relaunched the program, and chose to make the public announcement as he introduced Angela Davis, the keynote speaker at a symposium on diversity being held at the university. That opening night, so to speak, was one of nearly unrivaled activist energy, and students began enrolling in the newly launched minor almost immediately. The previous director’s objective was to re-establish an interdisciplinary minor that drew together a range of courses already on the books, not to add specifically African American Studies courses to the curriculum, as we have done. In other words, by design the African American Studies interdisciplinary minor did not compete with other existing programs, thereby assuaging departmental fears about enrollment numbers on the one hand and safeguarding against potential anxieties about a more robust Afro-centric curricula on the other. For the most part, then, the reestablishment of the African American Studies minor was not met with the institutional resistance that, historically, has often accompanied the creation of Afro-centric programs within the academy.  

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104 As Ibram X. Kendi (formerly Ibram H. Rogers) notes, a significant backlash to Afro-centric programs began shortly after their establishment in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, leading to charges of so-called “reverse racism,” among other fallacious justifications for maintaining a Eurocentric status quo. “The professed standardization of inclusion,” Kendi avers, “now too often excludes the champions of diversity from instituting race-specific programs, the primary way to eliminate past (and not to mention present) inequities.” See Kendi, *The Black Campus Movement*, 164.
A year into the new program, the director announced that he would be leaving the university, and he expressed his concern regarding the program’s future. He convened a meeting with us and other figures at the university to discuss the possibilities. It became clear that his home department’s infrastructure could not maintain the program once the director left. We were personally told that an African American Studies director needed to be put in place immediately, and this is when we met for the first time to discuss the possibility of us (a tenured Black woman CJC professor and an untenured white woman English professor) partnering to lead the program. It is important to underscore that we did not know each other prior to this meeting because forging an alliance has been one of the key mechanisms for growing the program, even as it has also meant being conscientious about the distinct set of experiences and worldviews that we bring to our collective table. To complicate matters, the administration of the program has for a variety of reasons been maintained by three different departments, with faculty members from numerous other departments teaching African American Studies courses. This piecemeal infrastructure often causes confusion for students, faculty, and administrators, not to mention us, becoming a distraction from the real work at hand: centralizing the experiences of African Americans and, in the process, dismantling Eurocentrism.

In other words, while interdisciplinary collaborations are often quite beneficial, they are also challenging to manage on both logistical and personal levels. They return us to the questions of who is able to make and remake freely, as well as to whose stories are not only told but institutionally preserved. In this regard, our collaboration and our program goals are guided by the belief that, especially at PWIs, we need to invest in empowering Black students, faculty, and staff. We want to remake our community into one in which whiteness is neither the default norm, nor the black/white binary the only opportunity to discuss African American life. As Ta-Nehisi Coates puts it in his National Book Award-winning *Between the World and Me* (2015), “They made us a race, we made
ourselves into a people.”\textsuperscript{105} This focus on African American people, not fallacious constructions of racial essences, has provided generations of Black students and their allies with epistemological refuge, especially at PWIs. Further, as Roxane Gay describes in “Feel Me. See Me. Hear Me. Reach Me,” “When it comes to showing young black students there are teachers who look like them, when it comes to mentoring and being there to support students, I feel like it’s everyone’s job (regardless of ethnicity), and if you don’t believe that as a black academic, you need to check yourself.”\textsuperscript{106} We are invested in building a supportive, affirmative community that ensures that all of our students and colleagues feel seen, heard, and valued. Our partnership has been rewarding, and our commitment to ensuring that Black worldviews receive the attention they deserve is steadfast, but it should be noted that, for distinct reasons stemming from our own backgrounds and experiences, it has been an ongoing struggle not only to maintain the African American Studies program but also to ensure its relevance and rigor.

The question of who is vested with the agency to envision and implement curricular and, ultimately, institutional change is crucial. We feel certain that our colleagues elsewhere, both inside and outside academe, grapple with these concerns about voice and agency when pushing for Afrocentric approaches at PWIs, especially when these efforts are spearheaded by Black women. First and foremost, one must confront a history within predominantly white organizations and institutions of promoting and rewarding whites in contrast to a history of trepidation surrounding Black-led initiatives. Organizational behavior scholars Samantha E. Erskine and Diana Bilimoria explain that the white hegemonic gaze thwarts professional Afro-Diasporic women’s advancement through “a ubiquitous system of surveillance, permissions, and exclusions by an objectifying gaze that racially interpellates Blackness, makes Afro-Diasporic people feel as though they are either guests or strangers

\textsuperscript{105} Ta-Nehisi Coates, \textit{Between the World and Me} (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 149.
in White spaces, and with expectations that since Afro-Diasporic people are being ‘accommodated into a White system,’ they should therefore be grateful and not complain about racism.”  

Further, the time and energy expended not only in striving to implement change in the face of institutional barriers but also over anxieties about support affect faculty of color and their allies differently. As Stephanie M. Wildman and Adrienne D. Davis note, “Members of privileged groups can opt out of struggles against oppression if they choose.”  

In other words, white scholars (and activists) working toward racial equity nearly always have an escape hatch, lowering the material and even emotional stakes of their efforts in comparison with their colleagues of color. In addition to these endemic forms of bias and exclusion, pioneering women within Black Studies arenas have not always received the prominent place that they deserve. As Shirley Moody-Turner and James Stewart observe, “Africana studies faces a continuing challenge of combating the invisibility of Africana women in the public sphere and the marginalization of their historical and contemporary voices. This challenge is not unique to Africana studies; rather it is one that derives from the patriarchal nature of most societies and is reflected in the fields and modes of inquiry.”  

In our collaboration, we have tried both to confront and guard against these historical and contemporary biases and erasures and to share these experiences in order that they might offer guidance to current and future scholars, teachers, and activists who find themselves in similar circumstances. In what follows, therefore, we examine our individual perspectives and then offer brief takeaways about the process of attempting to remake places and spaces that ensure the centrality of Black life at a PWI.

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THE DIRECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

As a Black mother who is an associate professor in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology, and a community-engaged scholar, I wear many hats but had very little experience working with university administrators prior to assuming the role of director of African American Studies with the departure of my colleague. Moreover, my interactions with faculty outside of my department was limited to serving on university and college committees and the few Black faculty whom I have connected with to form meaningful friendships. My focus on being promoted from associate professor to professor enabled me to rationalize that this isolation was important because I needed the time to work on the requirements for being promoted. Although the university and college expect larger amounts of service in promotion from associate professor to professor, the gold standard is still publications. Taking on additional responsibilities that go beyond serving in one’s home department, in the community, and in one’s discipline can be prohibitive to one’s goals for promotion, simply due to the time-consuming nature of service work. Because women of color are often tapped to serve on more committees than their white and male counterparts, I have had to think seriously about my level of service. Amado M. Padilla has used the phrase “cultural taxation” to describe the extra burden of service responsibilities placed upon minority faculty members because of their racial or ethnic background. As he reports, in some cases, faculty members may feel obligated and will not say “no,” recognizing the importance of having cultural representation. Others will not say “no” due to fear of repercussions. Faculty of color take on these service responsibilities, limiting their ability to maintain an active research agenda, which in turn affects their ability to move forward in promotion. With all this in mind, I have approached my service responsibilities with kid gloves, consciously limiting the amount of service I commit to within an academic year.

This concern about service coupled with my goal for promotion meant that I never envisioned that I would be leading a university program or department, although I do have career aspirations to one day direct a center that focuses on community engagement within an urban setting. The day I was appointed as director of the African American Studies program was therefore not a day of celebration but rather one that was full of trepidation and uncertainty. At the same time, as the only tenured Black female in my home department, I thought that leading African American Studies would at least be an opportunity to build community and to address the feeling of isolation that myself and other faculty of color face. I also hoped that serving as the director of the program would allow me to connect with students of color, since in my field of study engagement with students of color is rare. Ultimately, I recognized that taking on this role would slow down my progress toward promotion from associate professor to professor, but I opted to focus on these community-building experiences because I knew it was important not only for me but also for affirming and preserving Black stories in a PWI setting.

When I took over as director of African American Studies, the program did not offer any course with the African American Studies prefix (AFAM). My initial goal was to revise the curriculum and to develop standalone courses that would have the AFAM prefix. After careful research and consideration of students’ needs, I developed three new courses: Introduction to African American Studies, African American Studies Theory and Methods, and African American Studies Capstone. The creation of these courses was important to ensure that African American Studies began developing its own identity as a standalone program. Moreover, these AFAM classes would offer students a sustained, scaffolded course of study in Black life, both past and present. When instituting new courses, the university requires that they go through various committees for approval to ensure that they meet the goals of higher education and that they do not compete with other courses already

being offered. Perhaps surprisingly, we had very little pushback for the creation of the three new AFAM courses.

With these courses now in the catalog, we are just beginning to see the realization of my initial goal, but this is also only the first step to ensuring that Afro-centric courses are more widely available. As I reflect on curriculum development, I am hopeful that colleagues and departments will move beyond teaching multicultural curricula and focus more on courses that center the Black experience. For example, my plan to teach a special-topics course on Black criminology is the first of its kind in my home department, while also providing African American Studies minors with an opportunity to use Black theoretical paradigms and decolonized research methodological techniques as they study the treatment of Black people within the criminal justice system. I hope that more departments will take my lead and see the value of developing courses that consider Black experiences through the lens of Afro-centric theoretical models.

THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR’S PERSPECTIVE

As a cisgender woman of European descent who teaches African American literature and African American Studies courses, I am nearly always confronting scenarios in which I have to consider the limitations of my lived experience versus my academic knowledge. Nearly two decades ago, I began my teaching career in a predominantly Black high school—an experience that both awakened me to my unearned racial privileges and set me on my current path as a scholar-teacher of African American literature. My subsequent immersion in African American Studies has been transformative, facilitating the process of destabilizing my rather Eurocentric upbringing and shifting my attention to the African Diaspora, especially its profound significance for understanding American history, art, politics, and society more generally. In my current role as the assistant director of an
African American Studies program, I strive to leverage my position and (white) privilege to empower Black students and colleagues.

At the same time that I divest of Eurocentric ideologies in my life and work, including in my predominantly Black classrooms, I am consistently aware of the power dynamics that have been scripted before any of us set foot on campus, and my role as the assistant director of African American Studies has put these concerns into even sharper focus. I am grateful for these opportunities to examine the sociohistorical hierarchies that continue to structure university curricula, as well as the relationships between colleagues, teachers and students, and faculty, staff, and administrators. “Certainly, there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex,” Audre Lorde writes in “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference.” “But,” Lorde continues, “it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation.”112 In my writing, teaching, activism, and personal relationships, I am mindful of this refusal to countenance silence surrounding the ways we embody both historical and contemporary social stratifications. Civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer put it like this: “You are not free whether you white or whether you black, until I am free.”113 Freedom for my students, colleagues, and members of the community means that I, too, will no longer be shackled to systems of injustice. Yet, as Angela Davis reminds us with the title of her most recent book: *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle.*114

Because the director and I stepped into the leadership of African American Studies to ensure the stability of the program in the wake of our colleague’s announced departure, we have had to add

to our workload in ways that have been unexpected. While I am fully committed to the project of African American Studies in my professional and personal life, I, like the director, never imagined myself leading a program. Further, I have felt a significant amount of concern about assuming a leadership role in African American Studies as a person of European descent in an already predominantly white setting. For example, “diversity” and “inclusion” are terms that are used with increased frequency in academe, and I am invested in both of these concepts. At the same time, I remain keenly aware that these terms are capacious and elastic, capable of being invoked to engineer equitable change and to support the status quo. As Davis cautioned in an interview with Gary Younge in 2007, “When people call for diversity and link it to justice and equality, that’s fine. But there’s a model of diversity as the difference that makes no difference, the change that brings about no change.” Jennifer C. Nash likewise observes that diversity initiatives often “selectively usher a few bodies into exclusive institutions” without fundamentally remaking the exclusions that constitute those institutions.

If we are to remake PWIs into spaces that are inclusive of all backgrounds and experiences, that do not implicitly privilege the worldviews of dominant groups, it is incumbent upon us and the institutions in which we labor to engage in truth and reconciliation work. To give Black (and brown, queer, nonbinary, disabled, among others) individuals a seat at the table is the first step, and the next ones must include where we have been as a community in terms of injustice and exclusion, and what it would mean to reimagine a landscape that does not perpetuate the inequities of the past and their contemporary residue. Personally, I have to be strategic about using my voice to amplify the perspectives of people of color, but I also need to be keenly aware of when I need to step back. Moreover, through the unearned advantage of skin pigmentation I have decided to dedicate much of

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my personal and professional energy to challenging anti-Black ideologies and policies. My friends and colleagues of color, on the other hand, do not always have that choice.

WHOSE STORIES ARE BEING TOLD, AND HOW ARE THEY BEING PRESERVED?

In “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” Lorde reminds us of the danger of “historical amnesia that keeps us working to invent the wheel every time we have to go to the store for bread.”117 “We find ourselves having to repeat and relearn the same old lessons over and over that our mothers did,” she adds, “because we do not pass on what we have learned, or because we are unable to listen.”118 As we have learned through our individual and collective reflections on the challenge of maintaining and further enriching the African American Studies program at our institution, we must not only listen to our elders but also take stock of and share our stories so that we all do not suffer amnesia. As critical race theorists Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic note: “Powerfully written stories and narratives may begin a process of correction in our system of beliefs and categories by calling attention to neglected evidence and reminding readers of our common humanity. . . . They reduce alienation for members of excluded groups, while offering opportunities for members of the majority group to meet them halfway.”119 Put another way, the stories of African Americans and other marginalized groups are vital forms of testimony, combatting the long-standing American tendency to focus on Eurocentric experiences and worldviews. In our program, we recognize the power of Black stories—whether they be penned by canonical writers or passed down by our friends and neighbors—as crucial to remaking the university into an inclusive space that values, non-hierarchically, a variety of worldviews.

We also heed the lessons of Dr. Irma McClaurin, whose current work on the Black Feminist Archive focuses on preserving the multifaceted lives of Black women. In a recent interview, she asked

118 Ibid.
pointedly: “What are you doing to preserve your life?,” and then reminded us that “Not unlike the Black Lives Matter movement, we have to emphasize self-preservation.” As we work toward race and gender justice and guard against Eurocentrism in our personal and professional lives, we also have to preserve our experiences, passing them along to younger and future generations so that we can build intergenerational, interracial knowledge dedicated to the task of Black liberation. As the archivist Pellom McDaniels III likewise argued, “The white majority worked systematically to regulate and manage the narratives associated with people of African descent and their individual and collective histories, especially those that demonstrated blacks’ ability to rise above their circumstances. To be born disconnected from one’s history—past and present—is one sure way to confuse and alienate an individual’s sense of destiny and purpose.” A chief purpose of our African American Studies work, within and beyond the classroom, is to restore those connections, ensuring that Black faculty, students, administrators, and community members have sustained access to empowering narratives of past and present.

We have thus begun documenting our African American Studies events and conversations with students and colleagues to become part of our archive. We have also been increasing our capacity for community-engaged courses focused on, for example, documenting the challenges faced by individuals reentering society from prison and the social justice activities of African American women in our local area. Additionally, we are launching a workshop course that will not only teach students about the dehumanizing impact of racism but also actively engage them in the work of, to borrow the phrasing of Ibram X. Kendi’s recent title, becoming antiracist. All of these endeavors represent our

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121 Pellom McDaniels III, The Price of Jockeys: The Life of Isaac Burns Murphy (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2013), 44.
122 Ibram X. Kendi, How to Be an Antiracist (New York: One World).
commitment to collaborative storytelling and archiving as means of making marginalized voices heard and, further, remaking the institutional value system into one that privileges interdisciplinary community.

Even co-writing about the historically significant aspects of how the program came into fruition contributes to the body of literature regarding the development of Black Studies programs at PWIs across the United States. These peer-reviewed publications will also work to support our own journeys toward tenure and promotion, ensuring that our service commitments are working hand-in-glove with our scholarship and our core investment in the significance of African American stories. In this regard, this essay is really only a chapter in an unfolding narrative about what it means to remake and revise, to share and preserve, and, more broadly, to struggle toward a dismantling of Eurocentrism within the context of a diverse and affirmative community.

Moreover, in this moment of increased racial consciousness, as well as COVID-19 and economic recession, both of which have disproportionately impacted Black and Latinx communities—people in all sectors, including higher education, are eager to champion the rallying cry of Black Lives Matter. Since the inception of our program, we have been centering Black experiences and underscoring why they matter. While we appreciate the many statements and action plans being issued by our colleagues in other fields, we remain committed to the anti-racist, intersectional, Black-centric agenda that we have been pursuing for years. We will continue to sustain and enrich our curriculum; mentor and create meaningful classroom experiences for our Black students; and collaborate with groups such as the Student Anti-Racism and Intersectionality Advisory Council, which we launched well before the murder of George Floyd. We also want to remain mindful of the ways in which Black faculty and staff are overburdened during this time of protest. Non-Black colleagues and community members want guidance: What books and articles should we read, and how should we discuss these texts with our friends and family? How should we counsel our children
regarding anti-Black violence? And, the list of questions goes on and on. We want to provide guidance because we are so deeply invested in these issues, but we also need to be careful not to, once again, overburden faculty of color with teaching white people about racism. As we all know by now, racism is a white problem, and it requires white individuals and groups (including academic departments) to take responsibility for dismantling white supremacy—internally, interpersonally, ideologically, and institutionally. As an African American Studies program, our role is to stay focused on the ongoing work of maintaining Black-centered curricula and programs, as well as ensuring the well-being of Black students, staff, faculty, and community members.

As we look to the future, we also recognize that our positions of leadership within the program may not be forever, but our commitments to the discipline, to students, and to the broader community are steadfast. In this respect, we have to think about how our story will end and what we are leaving behind because in that way we are constantly thinking about our archive—of African American Studies, of our experiences within it, and about the rewards and challenges of striving to decenter whiteness in predominantly white spaces. As we are currently in positions to support and develop the study of Black life, we must do so with conscientiousness and care. As leaders, we must be aware that with every conversation, program, and course we offer we are creating a narrative about the program, and these narratives and artifacts are part of our legacy.

Fifty years ago, as students nationwide were urging universities and colleges to adopt Black Studies curricula, June Jordan issued a defiant call in her essay “Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person”: “We look for community. We have already suffered the alternatives to community, to human commitment. We have borne the whiplash of ‘white studies’ unmitigated by the stranger ingredient of humane dedication. Therefore, we cannot, in sanity, pass by the potentiality of Black studies: studies
of the person consecrated to the preservation of that person.”¹²⁻¹ With this historical urging both for community and for a holistic commitment to Black/African American Studies in mind, we recently held a celebratory dinner at which we honored the graduation of our inaugural class of minors. An African American Studies faculty member read her poetry, each of us spoke briefly about the pride we felt in our students’ achievements, Black alumni shared their words of wisdom, and, ultimately, we glimpsed the possibility of writing a new story with the nurturing of Black spaces and places at its center. One student emailed later to say, “I didn’t want the night to end.” As we consider what kinds of experiences and stories to preserve, this is an important one, for amidst all of the challenges of remaking a historically Eurocentric curricula and institutional culture into one that values Black life in all of its beauty and complexity we also want to preserve (à la Dr. McClaurin) the rewarding moments when all of the pieces to this new narrative fell into place. “I didn’t want the night to end,” indeed.

Bibliography


“Don’t Speechify: Do Something”: A Case Study on the Power of Counter Narrative

Darolyn “Lyn” Jones, Ed.D.

INTRODUCTION

Truth: The official narrative of the United States is one of freedom, but in a 1776 democracy, our freedom narrative was written for white males. It was not meant to be democracy for the rest of us. “Racism is entrenched in the structure of everything. If and when black lives finally matter,” activist and scholar Angela Davis proclaims, “then all lives will matter, but until that happens, black equality, freedom, and voices are not recognized.”

In DiAngelo’s now well-known book, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*, reminds us that “The United States was founded on the principle that all people are created equal. Yet the nation began with the attempted genocide of Indigenous people and the theft of their land. American wealth was built on the labor of kidnapped and enslaved Africans and their descendants. Women were denied the right to vote until 1920, and black women were denied access to that right until 1964.”

Angela Davis, truth teller, presented a challenge when I heard her speak to faculty and students at a higher education institution: “Don’t speechify.” Don’t just say something, DO something. Be an activist. If you work in academia, then use your power of writing to be a scholar activist and engage students in the action. I interpreted this call from Davis to mean that we in academia should design curriculum and deliver content that allows students to study and take action, change their own thinking.

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126 Davis, Key Note.
and ideally enact change with the citizens in the very cities and communities where their campus resides and with the future citizens they will impact in the future.

I am a lifelong activist who grew up poor, living in several different households. I am a white female and first generation college graduate. My early career included teaching English in high-poverty rural, public school districts while also volunteering as a public school teacher union organizer and a state Holocaust educator. I was always committed to teaching a social justice curriculum in my state’s conservative, Midwestern communities.

I left the classroom to pursue a doctoral degree, taking a part-time position at the Indiana Writer’s Center as its Education Outreach Director. For the last ten years, I have been simultaneously working with the Center as well as teaching as a contract faculty member for a Midwestern, midsized public university. At the Center, I assist and teach with our Public Memoir project, which helps marginalized populations in the city write and present their stories to the community at large. We publish those stories with our independent press and often also perform these stories as fused theater and dance events. We invite the public to come, hear, and learn more about the lived human experience of their marginalized neighbors.

The Indiana Writers Center hires university education and creative writing student interns in the summers to assist us with the youth Public Memoir project, where the Center serves 200-250 high poverty, underserved students ages 6-16, partnering with the city’s various community centers and existing summer youth programs. The students we serve with this project are all African American or bi-racial; the majority of our university student interns are Caucasian and from middle or high-income communities. At the university, I work as a community engagement scholar partnering creative writing and writing program students with community partners to either write community stories or engage in research that impacts positive change for the community partner. What I am presenting is a case study that intersects the two populations I teach and serve.
This is a case study of an educational program delivered by the Indiana Writers Center, a literary non-profit organization. The case study is two-fold. It presents questions and data that include both the students ages 6-16 that we at the Center serve in our Public Memoir Program and the university student interns who assist with the delivery of the curricular content of the counter narrative we engage students to write. The research questions that guided this case study are as follows: How can the design and delivery of a counter narrative curriculum disrupt the master narrative? And, how does the production of counter narratives disrupt the master narrative?

To clarify, how does the design and delivery of a counter narrative disrupt the master narrative that students ages 6-16 learn in their prior traditional educational experience? And how does what the students ages 6-16 write disrupt what the university students have learned in their own traditional educational experience? How does the writing produced by the students ages 6-16 and the reflective writing produced by university student interns disrupt the master narrative?

Yin, a leader in the field of case study, defines case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident.” Yin clarifies that “case study relies on multiple sources of evidence with data.” 127 Thomas concurs, noting that case study is a unique type of inquiry because we are charged with “understanding how and why something might have happened or why it might be the case.” And Thomas adds that while researchers use different methods and sources of data to investigate, a case study at its core is “looking at relationships and processes.” 128

This is a case study where, like Thomas, I too am interested in the “thing it itself, as a whole.” Both case study experts, Yin and Thomas, agree that as case study researchers we must examine our

subjects from a variety of perspectives. According to Thomas, key features of case study is having an intimate connection with the “thing” or the subject being studied and because of that intimacy, the researcher wants to study the case. I have access and know the urban youth we serve through the Center, and I know and have access to my university student interns as I actively recruit from the university where I teach.

Christine Stanley explains the difference between master versus counter narratives: “A master narrative is a script that specifies and controls how some social processes are carried out.”

Perspectives that run opposite or counter to the presumed order and control are counter narratives. These narratives, which do not agree with and are critical of the master narrative, often arise out of individual or group experiences that do not fit the master narratives. Counter narratives act to deconstruct the master narratives, and they offer alternatives to the dominant discourse in educational research. They provide, for example, multiple and conflicting models of understanding social and cultural identities. They also challenge the dominant White and often predominantly male culture that is held to be normative and author.

Stanley makes it perfectly clear that master narrative is not a single perspective, and that counter narratives “arise out of individual or group experiences that do not fit the master narratives.” Counter narratives act “to deconstruct the master narratives and they offer alternatives to the dominant discourse…”

ACCESS TO COUNTER NARRATIVES IN PREK-HIGHER EDUCATION

Think about the spaces and places where books live. Bookstores (which are dwindling and becoming larger and less independent), libraries (whose funding is being slashed all over the country), department stores (who stock only what sells and what sells is what is popular or “classic”), and classrooms (where the choices are contingent on the curriculum and the stories the individual teacher

129 Gary Thomas. 2016, How to do your case study, 3.
knows and since 80% of teachers are white and from middle class backgrounds, these stories may not be inclusive.\textsuperscript{131,132}

Diversity in the texts we teach students in school or academia is critical in constructing culture and community identity. We grow up, are conditioned by, and are ultimately wired and rewired by the texts we read, hear, and retell. The gatekeeping of diverse text happens at home, in educational institutions, in communities, from publishers who often prevent counter narratives from being consumed, read, learned, and therefore, valued.\textsuperscript{133}

An example of this gross disparity can be seen with children’s and young adult literature, which represent the highest producing genre in the publishing market. A 2014 study and statistic offered by the leading research agency for children’s literature, the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin, notes that of the 3,200 children’s books published in 2013, only 93 were about Black people despite the fact that Black population in this country is 14.1%. The most recent study just released for 2019 shows those numbers increasing, but unfortunately, not enough. Of the 4,034 of the total children’s books published in 2019, 219 were by Black authors and 472 were about Black characters, still representing only 17% of the total children’s book market. And given the pressure placed on publishers to diversify, that 2019 stat only increased by .5% from 2018.\textsuperscript{134}

In “The Apartheid of Children’s Literature,” young adult writer and journalist, Christopher Myers discussed the 2014 above study, admonishing publishers, illustrating to New York Times readers that while “the mission statements of major publishers are littered with intentions, with their commitments to diversity, to imagination, to multiculturalism, while the editors of these companies bemoan the statistics, ‘the fact remains that the ‘numbers and truths are stark reassurances.’ The children’s and young adult literature franchise, Myers points out, is growing and becoming more and

\textsuperscript{133} Darolyn Jones, “New Publication Highlights the Need for Diverse Books,” 34.
more popular, yet ‘young people of color are harder to find.’”¹³⁵ Institutional racism remains an issue in this country and no doubt in the current publishing climate as well.

As a classroom teacher committed to social justice, I was aware of the misrepresentations in the history books, the lack of representation in the literature anthologies, and the curriculum and standardized tests which perpetuated stereotypes and were riddled with bias. I volunteered at the state level to create the first set of state standards to combat those misrepresentations and to audit state tests for bias. Unfortunately, there weren’t enough of us to challenge, and we were constantly battling politicians and the State Department of Education’s current agenda.

While I was seeking my doctorate, I worked as a PreK-12 consultant conducting curriculum audits of classroom curriculum. Having the opportunity to see curriculum being taught in schools all over the state illustrated clearly to me that teachers still held the most power in determining what curriculum and how that curriculum was taught. Counter narrative was minimally or rarely included. What few opportunities were included for counter narratives or non-Eurocentric histories were typically condensed or taught out of context.

When I joined the ranks of higher education, I was hopeful that academia would include more educators like me who were also committed to teaching counternarrative. I haven’t discovered that to be true. Similarly to PreK-12, I did find a camp of social activists in higher education committed to teaching the counter narrative. Overall, the academy still mostly teaches our students using stories and strategies from textbooks and classic literature that are dominated by a white patriarchy. The majority of our university professors? White males. The primary generators of academic publications? White males. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), in 2017, 41% of the

professors in higher education were white males, 35% female and only 3% represented Black and Hispanic males and females.\textsuperscript{136}

It’s important to note that 73\% of all faculty positions in higher education are held by non-secure faculty working as adjunct, part time, or contract. So, when one examines the data of non-secure faculty, the numbers showcase decreased representation in post-secondary institutions, with 54\% of males occupying higher positions of tenure and power while only 27\% of women and fewer than 2\% Black or Hispanic faculty hold similar positions.\textsuperscript{137} With this low representation of Black and brown voices and an even lower representation of gender and race diversity in positions of power, the academic journals and textbooks written and taught in higher education are also overwhelmingly white and male. Stanley contends that “there is a master narrative operating in academia that often defines and limits what is valued as scholarship and who is entitled to create scholarship.”\textsuperscript{138}

Because the gatekeepers within the educational, literary, and academic textbook and journal publishing houses are led primarily by white male editorial teams, they silence counter narratives. National Public Radio (NPR) featured a story on diversity in book publishing. NPR’s reporting featured a survey that reported on staff demographics within departments.

In Marketing and Publicity, 77 percent were white. These are people who make decisions on how to position books to the press and to consumers, and if and where to send authors on tour — critical considerations in the successful launching of any publication. For writers of color, the lack of diversity in book publicity departments can feel like a death knell.\textsuperscript{139}

And the majority of books, novels, or articles presented to those publishing houses are also written by white males. Vida, a literary arts organization focused on equality, shared 2017 data from \textit{New York}

Review of Books where 77% of the books were by male writers and only 23% by female writers.\textsuperscript{140} The message? White, patriarchal texts are what are sought after, what are published, what are shelved and too often, what are taught.

Who is the audience for these texts? Who are the majority of students attending the universities? At my university, the audience is overwhelmingly white, middle class and upper middle-class students seeking advance degrees. Racial diversity has made improvements, but the academy still mirrors the national statistics where only 14% of students enrolled in universities are Black. However, the publishers publish for the dominant and master narrative. A deficiency of diversity and counter narrative in publishing leads to no pedagogical change, hence, closing the door to diversifying our instructors at the academy and to our student population.\textsuperscript{141} DiAngelo summarizes this point: “The identities of those sitting at the tables of power in this country have remained remarkably similar: white, male, middle- and upper-class, able-bodied. The decisions made at those tables affect the lives of those not at the tables.”\textsuperscript{142} And whether we are discussing political power or the agendas of educators and publishers, the decisions made about what to write, publish, shelve, and teach have serious consequences.

Finding works or designing counter narrative curriculum that counters the white, patriarchal hegemony require an individual instructor in PreK- Higher Education to:

1) Have access to counter narratives
2) Have knowledge and experience with teaching counter narratives
3) Know how to design and deliver a counter narrative curriculum; and
4) Have the intellectual freedom at a university to teach a counter narrative without fear of being muted, reprimanded, or facing job loss.

\textsuperscript{142} Robin DiAngelo, \textit{White Fragility}, 2018, xii.
My 30 years of combined experience teaching in secondary and higher education has clearly illustrated to me that too many teachers teach what and how they were taught. Again, as noted previously, since 80% of preK-12 teachers are white and 76% of university professors are white, then this is how the white patriarchal classic novel, textbook, and article becomes disseminated as the dominant and correct narrative over and over within content areas.

The lack of a counter narrative in higher education means we model that some stories, strategies, and philosophies matter and some don’t. The university is erasing stories or denying they exist by not teaching them or by only periodically lightly salting them so one can say proudly, patting themselves on the back, “Look, see here. I taught something multicultural.”

Not having access to counter narratives means we are denying students access to inclusive and diverse knowledge and content. As diversity and minority populations are increasing in this country, so are they growing at the university. Not enough, but they are improving. For Black students, those numbers have increased from 10% to 14% since 1976 and for Hispanics from 4% to 18%.143

Inclusivity and representation are even more paramount if a school’s population isn’t diverse. A classroom of white males needs to be taught about the political and social impact of the #MeToo movement and the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Where and how will our universities students hear those erased stories, voices, and perspectives? The media? According to DiAngelo, 85% of the individuals who decide which news is covered are white.144

According to the Washington Examiner, Generation Z derives their news source primarily from Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook. Fewer than 10% read newspapers or watch television news. And the survey reported on also found that only 4.6% of Generation Z trusts the media.145 While social

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144 DiAngelo, White Fragility, 31.
media can often be a positive outlet for counter narrative; as we have discovered in these last four years under the Trump administration, it can equally be a source for extremist narratives. Even if students are able to regularly access a reliable media outlet, without a resourceful and educated content expert to help them make sense with structured activities and discussions, how can them make sense and make meaning?

HOW CAN WE ENSURE ACCESS TO COUNTER NARRATIVES?

The Indiana Writers Center’s Public Memoir project is committed to writing, publishing, and performing counter narratives. Besides working with youth, the Center also works with other marginalized populations in our city tell their stories—of #BlackLivesMatter, of domestic violence, or living homeless—through the many historic and ongoing public memoir programs we deliver.

Because our program at the Center is a summer learning program focused on composing creative narrative nonfiction writing, we don’t want what we do to look or feel like school. For the majority of our students ages 6-16, school has failed them. For our university student interns, school has mostly celebrated them, which is why they have the privilege of accessing a university education. However, writing in a community writing center is very different than writing in school and at the university. There are no assignments or grades. We gather in small circles of poets, playwrights, fiction, and non-fiction writers to teach each other, share work, critique and move towards publication and performance.

We want all of our students, ages 6-16 and university interns to experience what it feels to write like a writer, not a school writer. Real writers don’t write for tests or in “timed” writing situations like we see in schools. They write poor first drafts, experimenting with words, style, and genre. They join with other writers to get feedback about what’s working and what’s not. And ideally, their finished work becomes published and accessible to other readers.
The Center believes that everyone can be a writer and that their words and stories matter. We solicit the counter narrative, not silence it. We even publish many of our community writers work with our independent press, INwords Publications and literary journal, *Flying Island*. The Center is doing something. We do not just “speechify” like Davis warned of. We do something. Our program serves as a resource and repository of stories for its city residents.

Creating access to a community center, not a classroom, is key for the students to experience and learn from the counter narratives in the community and is critical in disrupting the manifested and established master narrative too often taught and learned in the PreK-higher education classroom. In the design and delivery of our counter narrative curriculum, we present and model resistance writing prompts that allow both of our sets of students to write and share stories of hope and hopelessness, challenge and joy, and of #BlackLivesMatter. McFaddon speaks to the power and the societal fear of resistance writing with African Americans:

> Because script/text is so powerful in terms of human progress, as a tool of communication, of political expression and transformation, writing and being a writer – one who speaks about society either to maintain the status quo or as a Revolutionary—the script has always been deeply contested and remains a dangerous practice for Africans who bring the notion and practice of thought leadership to writing.¹⁴⁶

The resistance writing prompts we generate prompt urgency or exigence. A writing prompt is not the same as a writing topic. The word “prompt,” used as a verb, means to move, to induce, to prepare for action. Our prompts are designed so both of our students not only want to write, but need to write.

As part of our instruction at the Center, we teach students that writing comes from three places: your head, your heart, and your gut. Academic writing or as we call it with young students, “school writing,” is from the head. To push words out of your head down to your arm and pour them

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out through your fingertips onto the page is a shorter and easier path than pushing those words up and out of your heart and over to your arm and then moving the words down that long arm to pour then onto page. And the writing that comes from the gut exists in an even deeper place.

We remind students that we aren’t writing for school. We will write like real writers, from the heart and from the gut. We talk about what it means to write to resist, to use writing as a way to be heard and also to protest. We want all of our writers to be unsilenced, to scream on paper if they want to or need to. McFaddon again explains that:

if one writes against the status quo – against Patriarchal privilege and plunder; against the exploitation and suppression ....and repressive infrastructures of the state which are used to violate and subordinate the working people in the main; if one writes as resistance to unequal and exploitative systems and practices, one becomes vilified and excluded.147

It’s important to us at the Center that we promote and celebrate our young African American voices, their stories, their history. It’s equally important that our university interns understand their own privileges and learn from the mouths of babes who do speak to exploitation, suppression, and repression.

To directly engage university students in their own learning, student interns are assigned to one to two community site locations and after the first week are assigned to either round tables or floor writing spaces with students. The student interns remain with this core group for 6 to 8 weeks. Our university students choose their prompts from a list, write their own responses with students in their community centers sitting at tables or on the floor, not in desks and chairs. All writers are encouraged to write to the prompt employing any genre they wish: poetry, in narrative, as lyrics, or as spoken word.

Interns are helping students brainstorm ideas for their own writing, writing with students they are assigned to write with. We teach and model that university interns aren’t “teaching,” but engaging

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147 Patricia McFaddon, “African Thought Leadership: Writing as/for Resistance,” iii.
as a community writer swapping feedback with the students. University interns must gain their student’s trust in order to hear intimate and powerful counter narratives about race, violence, politics, and the community in which they, as individuals of privilege, live on the outskirts of, but not in. At the end of each session, university student interns debrief on what was written, heard, and learned. They also must write weekly reflective journal entries where they continue to inquire, wrestle, and make sense of what they are reading, hearing, and seeing.

At the end of the summer learning sessions, the Center publishes each student’s self-selected creative narrative nonfiction piece in a series titled, *I Remember: Indianapolis Youth Write About Their Lives* through our independent press, INwords Publications. Students choose what piece or pieces are published. They control the narrative, and it’s their narrative that is told. Those voices become permanent. Once on the page, they cannot be erased. Once heard by university interns, they cannot be forgotten.

**EXAMPLE COUNTERNARRATIVES COMPOSED BY THE YOUTH IN THE PROGRAM:**

**Prompt: “Since you asked, I’ll tell you why I’m angry…”**

*Saying My Piece*

11-year old African American female

Since you asked, I’ll tell you why I’m so angry. I’m angry because there is so much harm and danger in the world, and I can’t really do anything about it since I am just one person. All of the pollution is caused by us humans. No one is trying to fix or undo their mistakes. I want to make a difference in the world, but it’s really hard because it’s just going to keep occurring.

I know whoever is reading this is thinking, “Oh, this is just some silly 11-year old who doesn’t know what she is talking about. The thing is—what you don’t know—is that I am truly passionate about this. It is not okay that we are endangering our environment!

If we keep littering, smoking, and building, our trees will start dying. We don’t want our trees to die because eventually, we won’t have any more trees. Without trees, our oxygen supply will start to deplete, and our humanity rate will quickly deplete and eventually there will be no humans left on Earth.

Also, I haven’t even mentioned the animals in the seas and on the Earth. There are already many sea turtles that are endangered because of us. Our city lights are affecting baby turtles
after they hatch. Instead of going towards the water, they go towards roads and buildings where they quickly get run over and don’t even get a chance to live their lives.

There is so much more that I have to say, but I just wanted to hit a few points in this piece. After you have read this piece, I hope you will take caution with your actions when it comes to our environment. I hope you put this piece into your thoughts.

So please, watch your thoughts because they become words.
Watch your words because they become your actions.
Watch your actions because they become your habits.
Watch your habits because they become your character.
Watch your character, because it becomes your destiny.

The daily debriefing sessions can lead to some uncomfortable, yet poignant conversations. For example, the university interns were struck by this young person’s passion for the environment. One white intern said out loud what I suspect others were thinking: “I didn’t realize African Americans cared as much about the environment as I did.” This led to a discussion on why she had made that assumption. I remind them that engaging in tough talk and being uncomfortable is important to their learning, and I want them to ask or share anything they question or don’t know or take issue with.

This conversation about Black people and the environment then led to further investigations and discussions about the lack of recycling options within many of the city’s apartment complexes where most of our students reside. In following up with this young writer, she explained that she was upset about her inability to recycle at home. In talking with the community site partners, there was a proposal initiated for how to create recycling community drop off locations for these complexes.

Prompt: Tell us about what makes you really mad?
Racism
11-year old African American male

I want to bring up racism. So, the two people I think have a big history with racism are Donald Trump and Hitler.

Donald Trump wants to get rid of all the Mexicans. Hitler wanted to get rid of the Jews.

Donald Trump tried to block the Mexicans from coming to the United States of America. But he failed.

Hitler wanted to kill all the Jews. But he failed too.
They both failed, because we worked together to stop them. If we work together, we can end racism for good. That is why we need to continue fighting racism, to end it for good.\textsuperscript{148}

The interns were struck with this piece because of its use of metaphor, comparing Trump to Hitler, and the students style use of simple, yet commanding sentences that yield a rhythm, helping to reinforce the message. They were equally struck by how serious this young man was in composing this piece. He was a student that was hard to get focused and settled and who wanted to joke and be with his friends instead of write. But once he had the right prompt, his writing came through. Because as McFaddon suggests earlier, resistance and resistance writing aren’t normalized practices and vilified for African Americans so resistance writing takes time.

We invited local African American literary writer, Angela Jackson Brown, to model her writing in a session. She read aloud her resistance poetry, showing how she uses writing to protest the police brutality in the African American community. She explains resistance poetry as:

A popular art form at protests and rallies. Resistance poems capture the speaker’s rage at the modern world along with their desire to resist oppression. From the civil rights and women’s liberation movements to Black Lives Matter, resistance poetry is commanding enough to gather crowds in a city square and compact enough to demand attention on social media and college classrooms. Speaking truth to power remains a crucial role of the poet in the face of political and media rhetoric designed to obscure, manipulate, or worse.\textsuperscript{149}

An excerpt of the one of poems she read as an example, titled, “I Must Not Breathe” is below:

\begin{quote}
If I am stopped by the cops I must be quiet. I must not breathe.
I must not ask questions. I must not breathe.
I must not move.
I must not breathe. I must not talkback.
I must be compliant. I must not breathe.
I must not film the cop.
I must not call family or friends. I must not breathe.
I must not put my hands up or down. I must not breathe.
I must cooperate. I must be docile.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{148} Darolyn Jones, ed., \textit{I Remember: Indianapolis Youth Write about Their Lives}, (Indianapolis, IN: INwords Publications, 2019), 120.

\textsuperscript{149} Angela Jackson-Brown. Resistance Poetry Lecture for Indiana Writers Center at Ball State University, July 25, 2019.
I must stay in the car or get out, depending on the mood of the cop.150 After sharing other examples from poets such as Langston Hughes, Gil Scott-Heron, and Maya Angelou, Jackson-Brown then asked the students questions about what they want to protest and resist. Many answers were given including racism, discrimination, police brutality, and poverty. She then asked students to give ideas about what they could protest and resist from their own media sources and in their communities.

Many student examples were provided in response to Jackson-Brown, such as Disney movies and lack of representation, lack of public transportation, and school police officers. As this conversation developed and took tangents, an example was presented by a 10-year old African American female that truly impacted the university student interns.

She said that in the popular movie, *Toy Story*, Andy oversees the toys. When Andy is not there, the toys can be who they really are and do what they really want. She explained that when she is with predominantly white students or adults, it’s like Andy is in the room. When she’s at home in her community with her family, she can be who she really wants to be. You could see a visible inhale from all of the adults in the room and even some tears shed by my interns. Most folks had never considered what seemed like a benign role of this character in this popular film series.

That day with Jackson-Brown, an African American, as their teacher, the students did speak and write more freely than they did with the white university interns despite the fact that the interns had been working closely with the students for five weeks. My university student interns didn’t want to think of themselves as an “Andy,” but the students reacted and wrote differently for a Black teacher than they had for the white interns.

Below is a poem composed that day by one of the students based on a prompt asking them to write their own protest poem. This was a quiet student who always actively wrote and complied to directions given. She often corrected her Black dialect when speaking with us or when writing, but that day, she resisted because no Andy was in charge, and she wrote to resist freely.

No Ordinary Day; No Ordinary Message
12-year old African American Female

I don’t usually share my feelings, but today is different. It’s not any ordinary day—it’s a day to be explicit.

Im’a tell you how I feel, but hold on, here’s the deal, you can’t tell anyone else because this is for real.

When I was younger, I didn’t really understand, but now I am older and it’s time for me to take a stand. I need to be the change I want to see in the world, and you don’t have to listen, but this is my mission.

I stand for what I believe in so you can quit denying the fact that you need to cut the act and start giving back to what you stole from our economy; the bare soil from down under me because now our Earth is dying and you are still denying the fact that you need to cut the act, because you’re still spreading hate and you won’t stop until you see the fate of your own human race and I hope you are starting to realize that soon there won’t be any blue skies because the number of trees that we use to breathe will start to deplete, well at least retreat.

Oh wait! Y’all still wanna shoot and kill? Hold up, what’s the deal? What’s going through your brain that makes you think it’s ok to take others away from their families, to make other people flee from what they thought was home, and leave them all alone?

No, it’s not ok. No, it’s not the right way. No, this isn’t any ordinary day. No, it’s the day you will repay for the hole you dug inside of my heart. And yeah, this is nothing but smarts that is coming straight from the brain because every day I feel this constant pain because of you—because of what you did to this Earth. This is the only one we have, and we need to make it last because there is nothing else like it and I cannot deny it. So, you need to take care of it because we are all sharing it.

So yeah, you might think I’m an ordinary 12-year-old girl, who likes pink and pearls. Nope, this is what I like—standing up for what I believe in. So you can quit denying and start complying because hey, I’m not lying. So don’t get mad at me for sharing with you, the change I want to see and now I am done. I know that I have won. So stop spreading hate; this is not a debate!
COUNTERNARRATIVE EVALUATIONS COMPOSED BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS:

The results of border crossing, removed from the university classroom, learning counter narratives are illustrated below as excerpts from the university intern's end-of-summer evaluations, a summative writing exercises from their formative weekly journal entries.

University White Male:

Evaluation Prompt: Tell the story about something that happened during our summer site session with our students that made you think WOW! What did you like best about it? Why?

When he wrote about someone or something that he loved so dearly that he would be devastated to lose, he took just a moment to think and began scratching his pencil against the paper. After about thirty minutes, he presented his paper to me. It was nearly entirely filled with words. What I read left me amazed, impressed, proud, and overall just WOW.

He had written an intensely passionate confession about how much he cherished his mom and dad and the irrevocable pain he would experience if he ever lost either of them. Reading about his special concern regarding his military father who is frequently away or the detail about how his heart would sink, lower and lower past his feet, never to return to where it's meant to be, if he lost a parent shattered my own heart and evoked such an immense pride for him. The high caliber, honesty, and detail of his writing sharply stuck out to me, and still does.

In discussing this evaluation, he shared how close he was with his own parents and how accepting and supporting they have been of all of his unconventional decisions in life. He admitted that prior to this internship, he did work under the assumption that most of these children would come from broken homes or be living with a single mother or with a grandmother. I queried why he assumed that, and he said this is what he heard so often on the media, about Black men being in prison and women or grandparents taking care of the children left behind. He really didn’t think there would be children living in poverty who had both parents and both parents working. This led to a discussion of course about our class system where the ability to migrate up to middle is harder and harder as the gap increases. Because my husband is retired military, and I used to assist and work with new military families, I shared with him how there are many enlisted military families who still need food stamps and other assistance because they do not make enough in the military. Yes, being in the military is a
more guaranteed job, but the military like any other government or bureaucratic institution is still impacted by racism.

Evaluation Prompt: Tell the story about something that happened during our summer site session with our students that made you think, UGH! What was the worst thing about it? Why?

A little girl, no older than eleven, was writing about how she felt less than because of the president, how Trump hated her and people who looked like her, and how overwhelmingly unwelcome she felt in her own country. She attacked the broken, unfulfilled promises of our government, and questioned how the president could hate his own people when he should love them. A little girl wrote all of that. I couldn’t have felt more disappointed and ashamed in our country. Someone so young should never have to experience any of that discrimination and hate, and to read her own words, to discover how aware and in tune with reality she was, absolutely broke my heart. As a country, we can, and must, do better. These children deserve so much better, and somehow, we keep failing them. Nothing could make me think UGH more fiercely.

This response showed up over and over in the evaluation. In debriefing after the evaluations, several interns were surprised about how many of the students wrote about politics and how well-informed they were considering that most PreK-12 schools aren’t actively teaching topics such as racism or politics. Again, this led to discussions of how young people are listening and learning all the time and are invested in their futures. They hear their families and community talking about these issues, they watch the news, they are on social media. As an educator, I know that students are incredible absorbers of information, particularly with topics they are interested in or have a stake in.

**University Black Male Student**

Evaluation Prompt: Tell the story about something that happened to you this summer during our summer site sessions with our students. It can be something funny, something sad, something brave, any one something that stood out for you, that you distinctly remember.

In working with three young high school females who were struggling with how to find the words to say what they really wanted, I learned more about the Black female struggle.

1. As young Black women, they know they live in a world that would try to silence them, and that if they didn’t tell their story, who would? Anybody could try, but they would never get it right.
2. Writing can be a method of processing emotions, and oftentimes writers, like other artists, are hyper-emotional, so what they are doing is totally in line with what writers do. They’re feelings are valid and nobody can speak on those feelings they have but them.
Repetition, whether in message or literal wording, is a tool often employed by writers for subjects important to them. So that school essay-writing thing with avoiding repetition in schools isn’t representative!

I’d like to think of that as possibly being the most profound moment I’ve had in this role, which made me really really [sic] excited about what I was doing. By all means, my words may not have had any effect on those three students, but I feel like their choice to continue with their subject despite initial concerns is a sign that my words were at least encouraging and/or well-received.

I loved this response, because while this young man grew up in the community we were in and knew what it meant to grow up Black and underserved in this community, he learned a new counter narrative. His new awareness of how young, Black women feel. Reciprocally, he taught me something too. I was so focused on the African American youth counter narrative that I forgot to think about gender and the role of young Black women and young Black men in their individual gender roles within these communities.

**University White Female Student**

Evaluation Prompt: Capture how this experience will impact your future career choices and professional work.

As a preservice teacher, I’m acutely aware of the strange magic kids can bring to the world. However, during my time applying, interviewing, and finally working for the Indiana Writers Center, I had too many conversations with people who were underwhelmed by the concept of children writing memoirs—an almost as though a life lived seven or eight years isn’t a life worth telling about.

But the truth is that these kids taught me more than I taught them. They had more to say than we could ever have the time or space to hear. They had stories of love, loss, and the intricacies of their everyday lives. They had stories with happy endings, and stories whose happy endings hadn’t come yet, and may never come. They had so much to share about their fears, their hopes, their anxieties, and their strengths. They had opinions that were entirely their own. All it took was asking the right questions, giving them the right space, and inviting them with three simple words... *Tell me more.*

This response was poignant because of the intern’s awareness of how connected we all are. She saw these students not as students to be taught, but as humans. We have all felt love and loss. We all have hopes and fears. And we all have opinions. As a future teacher, she learned to stop
talking and instead listen. If she is struggling to know or teach a student, she learned that by simply asking, *Tell me more*…, she invites counter narratives into the master narrative space.

**Black Female University Student**

Evaluation Prompt: Tell the story about something that happened during our summer site session with our students that made you think WOW! What did you like best about it? Why?

During one of our sessions, I was able to share the story about being a Black girl, struggling with confidence in my natural hair journey. It was my first time I had ever written or shared my thoughts and feelings out loud for people to know. While writing this on this topic, I knew that I had to make it seem relatable for the girls in our session. I knew that it would help them whether it was that day, the next day, or even next year; to be confident in their own hair.

What I did not know was going to happen, was that one of the students would feel confident in that exact moment to write about her own journey with her natural hair. Her story was very authentic as she described what she has dealt with and how she responds to the people who try to tear her down. I was in shock because I did not realize the impact that my story could have on one student, that same day to share her story. We have to tell OUR stories, the ones that matter to us.

This African American intern grew up in a middle-class home with two professional parents. She attended a primarily white, preparatory high school and was always a high achieving student. She was told on more than one occasion by our students that she didn’t sound Black. She felt awkward about that and shared that sometimes her family says the same thing. She said that once she’s back around her family, her home language comes back. But she felt she should play the role of university student, not her family self. I talked with her about bell hooks and how when she left and went away to college and returned home, her knowledge, beliefs, and language had changed and she had to learn how to operate with her family in a new circle of conversation.151

When the female African American intern wrote about her hair as a model prompt for students, she opened up a so many conversations and quickly became a very popular intern. Again, the girls starting writing about their hair and wanted to work with her or have her read their pieces.

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This intern told me that she never got to talk about her hair at her all white school and rarely at the university as she is often the only Black girl in a space. She began proudly wearing her hair natural and using her own home language more around the university student interns, learning to navigate these two sides of her own master and counter narratives.

CONCLUSION

Teachers of writing at any age, grade, or academic level are notorious for teaching students to “show, not tell.” Angela Davis similarly says, “don’t speechify; do something!” Yet, I see many individuals in education giving this lip service with little, real action unless it serves a publication, public relations, or preservation purpose. Unless we teach students explicitly, modeling and showing them strategies for how to show, not tell, for how to do something, instead of just saying something…how will they learn? Unless we seek counter narrative content and design a counter narrative curriculum, how will they learn?

This program gives university students the opportunity to not just talk about activism, but do something, to show activism. And they get to experience authentic counter narratives. We are not erasing; we are not silencing. The young writers and the university students get to break away from the fetters of the hegemony and speak and write freely. Having access to, even soliciting, and subsequently learning the truth is the end goal. And it should be the goal and more importantly, outcome, of every responsible educator.
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The Emcee Spiel: A Poetic Reflection on Decentering the Self in the Classroom.

Adam Henze

When you get to the top of the mountain
Pull the next one up.
Then there’ll be two of you
Roped together at the waist
Tired and proud, knowing the mountain,
Knowing the human force it took
To bring both of you there.
—Marc Kelley Smith

The day that high school students took over my summer academy, I was arguably feeling a little defensive. Amidst the unfolding teen insurrection, a couple adult educators had arrived at the university to observe the morning lecture on “poetry and civic engagement.” I had to politely tell them it was not a good time for visitors, neglecting to mention that all the students of color attending the academic camp had quit in protest and were now inhabiting the lecture hall.

It was not a good look. The counseling staff and I waited with nearly 70 white students in the atrium, while their peers deliberated inside. I reminded one of the two counselors allowed in the lecture hall that the cafeteria staff was expecting us soon, but my concerns weren’t the priority at the moment. Everyone seemed generally angry with me.

When we were finally invited back into the room, all the students and staff filed into rows without a word. The phrase “Occupy Slam Camp” was scrawled on the dry erase board in black script. Roughly a dozen Black, Latina, and Asian high school students stood in the front of the room with

their arms folded. As I was directed to my seat—in the audience—I wondered which character from *Lord of the Flies* I emulated most. After judging some of the glares in the room, I realized the answer was probably the staked pig head.

Over the course of the next thirty minutes, I sat quietly as the minority students attending the summer academy where I served as director told me that my actions were racist and that I was fostering a toxic environment for young people of color. Some students said they wanted me to apologize. Others said that my apology would be an insult. I remember feeling very tired. I was sleep deprived and probably not making the best judgment calls. Thankfully, I was too drained to be temperamental. White students in the audience watched silently as their peers listed grievances about microaggressions they had experienced while attending the camp. I noticed that some white students had fixed their gaze toward the front of the room, while others were fixated on watching me watch the front of the room. I felt frustrated and ashamed. Students in the front of the room “passed the mic” to one another, giving each person a chance to speak in a space where they claimed they felt silenced. One of the Black counselors squeezed my hand as she passed by and said, “I know this is hard.” Then she walked away without any further comment or offering of unearned encouragement.

June 24th, 2016 remains the most humbling day I have ever experienced as an educator. A common adage in the profession states that teachers make 1500 decisions a day, and while I have grown accustomed to consistently making mistakes in my daily interactions with young people, there are still days of head-hanging shame that all teachers experience. The entire week seemingly went well, but on the last day of classes a lecture I had given a dozen times before went south. I’ll break the lesson down later in this article, but long story short: I am a professional wordsmith who should have

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been more careful with his words, and as a result, I hurt the feelings of young poets who were hoping to find dignity in the institution I helped build.

The day my students “checked me” for being a problematic white person, I had to take in that moment and then almost immediately set it aside. I still had a camp to run! Moments after the session, I walked a handful of students to another building on campus to pay their remaining tuition while talking on the phone with the Business Affairs Office to make sure the staff got their paychecks before the next billing cycle. From there I had to make sure students got home safely. Rooms had to be cleaned, keys had to be turned in, and lo—that is how “being busy” can bury an opportunity to think deeply about the day your students called you racist.

Ibram X Kendi said it is not enough for educators to be “non-racist,” because historically, neutrality has been “a mask for racism.” Instead, he argued that we must commit ourselves to being “anti-racist,” which he described as a process of actions and interrogations one must make to rid the world of racist policies and practices. If a gatekeeper such as myself wishes to become an anti-racist, then it is vital that I attempt to foster an “antiracist space.” While I may not be able to provide an unassailable “safe space” to all students at Slam Camp, I should have done better in providing all students a space where stakeholders involved work actively to combat racism. Kendi described “space antiracism” as “a powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to racial equity between integrated and protected racialized spaces, which are substantiated by antiracist ideas about racialized spaces.”

While I may be able to hang my hat on the 1499 other decisions I made that day, I made one terrible decision. Despite my intentions, I decided to foster a racist space—a space where students of color felt marginalized by myself and other white actors.

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156 Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 166.
Guilt and my generally anxious disposition have encouraged me to revisit the moment on a consistent basis, though an incident less than a year later encouraged me to think more critically about the student-led intervention. On April 15, 2017, the College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational (CUPSI) was wrapping up in Chicago, Illinois. Since the tournament was hosted in the birthplace of poetry slam, organizers of CUPSI asked founder Marc Smith to perform a set of poems before the final round of the international tournament, in front of hundreds of undergraduate students and mentoring teaching artists from around the world. Though there are some similarities between the “CUPSI incident” and my bad day at Slam Camp, the protest interrupting his incendiary performance was a much more public blowup. Several young poets in the audience felt that Smith’s message was condescending and stormed out of the auditorium. As Smith persisted and moved to the third poem in his set, a number of young poets reentered the auditorium in unison. Journalist Vangmayi Parakala described the scene vividly, which several young poets recorded on their phones and posted to social media:

As he recited, a line of poets started forming a human chain at the foot of the stage. With their backs to Smith, they protested by crossing their arms in an X over their chests as he spoke about how those in “the third world” had real problems, while in “our comfortable homes,” we are “milking the repression of our easy existence, stirring . . . our still free voices into teacup whirlpools of angst and despair.”

As someone who has competed and organized in the slam circuit for over fifteen years, it was hard to watch the scene unfold on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. I grew up revering Marc. He has been a guest in my home. Once my car was towed while I was the feature artist at The Green Mill, and he gave me extra money to remove my vehicle from impound. Many other veterans, who did not attend CUPSI, swarmed social media in attempt to defend Smith from the young poets posting their own reactions to the scene online. Suddenly, a public disagreement between one man and an

auditorium full of young artists turned into an intergenerational “flame war” across the World Wide Web.

It is hard not to compare the CUPSI incident to the time I was taken to task at Slam Camp. Poetry slam has been characterized as a “youth-led” movement for as long as I can remember, but now that the kids had turned their critique toward our “founder” it was like the grown-ups were saying, “well, not like that!” As I watched veteran poets I admire admonish teenage poets online, including some of my students, I asked myself dozens of questions: How did we get to here? Was Smith’s call-out in the same league as my own? What should stakeholders of influence learn from this? What parts of my own practice as a white, male organizer and educator should I interrogate? What do the generations of artists owe one another entrenched in this intergenerational dialogue? Where do we go from here?

This article serves two purposes: first, I will complicate the origin story of the poetry slam movement and contextualize the shift of agency between elders and youth. An important concept to consider is how performance poetry has historically been used as a tool for disruption. Second, with the guidance of my students and colleagues, I plan to delve deeper into my own “Slam Camp incident,” in an attempt to audit my own best practices as an antiracist educator. Readers will be introduced to the concept of “erasure” and will be asked to consider how dominant narratives commonly erase the contributions of artists of color. By comparing Smith’s story to my own, I encourage white teachers and artists to consider whether their practices contribute to the erasure of voices from diverse backgrounds.

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158 Andreana Clay, “All I Need is One Mic”: Mobilizing Youth for Social Change in the Post-Civil Rights Era, Social Justice 33, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 105.
In wake of the “CUPSI incident,” I believe that revisiting this moment is important for me as an educator, not because I wish to justify myself or dismiss the criticisms that were directed with me. Rather, my hope is to “think aloud” my own process of self-reflexivity, to encourage other elder teaching artists like myself to allow their students to steer their own self-interrogations as well. My aim here is to be self-critical, and not self-defensive or self-deprecating. In more poetic terms: this is me, “baring it all,” on stage.

RETHINKING THE EMCEE SPIEL

In this article, I adopt an “autoethnographic voice” to position myself as a teaching artist within the global spoken word poetry movement. In my academic work I often employ a creative process called “poetic inquiry,” where I adopt the tools of a poet to aid me in my storytelling. Before delving further into my own antiracist interrogation as an educator, it is necessary to give some context about the world of poetry slam. Archetypes are a foundational part of the establishment of narratives, which is why complicating the origin stories of artistic movements such as slam is important. However, even in my attempt to be inclusive, it is impossible to tell a complete story about the spoken word revolution. As slam organizer Becky Holtzman said, “Slam takes up space, and it doesn’t usually close into the pages of a book.”

At the beginning of every bout of an official slam competition, it is tradition that the host reads the emcee spiel: a prewritten speech that details the historical notes, rules, and guidelines for the competition. The spiel functions as both a primer for uninformed audiences and as a set of precepts

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for those ingrained into the community.\textsuperscript{163} The spiel also tells the tale of Marc Smith, a construction worker from Chicago who took up the pen in his early fifties. According to the spiel, Smith felt disconnected from elitist literary circles, so one day he crafted a new form of a poetry open mic with a populist twist: each poet would be judged by members of the audience, who were empowered to applaud, cheer, or even boo competitors.\textsuperscript{164} The impact of Smith’s creation, however, is not covered in the spiel: although slam was created as an anti-academic “sport” in an Uptown pub, this method of expression exploded into mainstream popularity in the mid-1990s. Poetry slam has traversed beyond the bar and coffee shop scene, and is now a pedagogic practice embraced by numerous educational institutions around the world.\textsuperscript{165}

Since the CUPSI incident, many venue organizers around the world have decided to remove mentions of Marc Smith from their spiel. One exhumed criticism in the CUPSI debate is that the Chicago construction worker narrative works to erase the contributions of artists of color.\textsuperscript{166} Others argue that Smith is an irreplaceable fixture in the legacy of slam. This tension is particularly important for teaching artists to sit with because the conflicting narratives of slam encourage us to consider which stories to take with us into the classroom.

So, what is the commonly told origin story of poetry slam? In the mid-1980s Smith was hosting a vaudevillian poetry show at a “tiny and terminally funky neighborhood bar” called The Get Me High Lounge.\textsuperscript{167} When one of his acts ran short one night in 1986, Smith devised an impromptu poetry competition where the audience would serve as judges—cheering for the poems they love and boo

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\item \textsuperscript{164} Cristen O’Keefe Aptowicz, \textit{Words in Your Face: A Guided Tour Through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam} (New York: Soft Skull, 2008), 24.
\item \textsuperscript{166} Birgit M Baird, “Contemporary ‘Black?’ Performance Poetry,” \textit{Amerikastudien/American Studies} 55, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 718.
\end{itemize}
the poems they do not. Chicago poet Dan Sullivan explained that the judicature component of slam was initially devised as a gimmick to energize the audience and make them—not the poets—the stars of the show.\textsuperscript{168} The spontaneous event was so popular that Smith turned it into a regular show. The event took place in Uptown, near Wrigleyville, so Smith and his friends borrowed terminology from baseball to host their “grand slam.”\textsuperscript{169} Over time, rules were standardized: the applause metric was replaced with scorecards, and judges were asked to provide poems with an “Olympic-style” score ranging from 0 to 10. Eventually the audience outgrew the closet-sized jazz club, and the Uptown slam soon moved to the historic Green Mill, a former haunt of Chicago gangster Al Capone. The first prize for winning the Sunday evening slam was often a Twinkie.\textsuperscript{170}

A construction worker gets back at academic tightwads by creating a global literary movement in the speakeasies of jazz legends and mobsters? It is a convenient mythos, easily memorable and self-contained within a single sentence. However, it is initially important that we problematize the construction-worker narrative of slam to better understand why a professed architect of a forty-year movement could be run out of poetry town on a proverbial rail in 2017. First, while Smith designed the basic format used in most poetry slam competitions today, it is important to distinguish that formal poetry competitions have long served as a heralded tradition in numerous cultures around the world, with notable examples occurring on every continent across the span of thousands of years. Hirsch explains that historically, “the poetic contest is a way of asserting, establishing, and proving selfhood,” and points to Ong’s claim that “in pre-romantic, rhetorical culture, the poet is essentially a contestant.”\textsuperscript{171} Critics have argued that the construction worker narrative particularly erases Afro-

\textsuperscript{169} Aptowicz, \textit{Words in Your Face}, 36.
\textsuperscript{170} Parakala, “Architect.”
diasporic verbal sparring traditions such as “toasting,” “playing the dozens,” and “battling” as it is known in hip-hop culture.\textsuperscript{172} This origin story of slam is much more complex in its telling.

Another reason to challenge the construction-worker narrative is because while Smith built slam as a practice, it was a diverse arts community that built slam into a global literary movement over time. Aptowicz explains that there was no homogenous slam culture in the 1980s that we might see at competitions today.\textsuperscript{173} When I meet people who do not know a lot about slam, one of the first things they ask me is if the performances are prepared or “freestyled,” which speaks to the cultural undercurrent that links spoken word to hip-hop. However, descriptions of slam in its initial years sound much less like a rap battle or cypher, and much more like something seen at a vaudeville show in an old-style saloon. A 1988 article in the \textit{New York Times}\textsuperscript{174} depicts the slam at the Green Mill in Chicago as a gathering of blue-collar workers, and not professional artists: a waitress, a liquor store owner, a former boxer, and a military veteran all share their work. And while most successful contemporary poets supplement their income, the important distinction is that the markers of their identity are found in their roles in the work force and not as established artists who contribute labor toward that established network for artists.

As the lore goes, the \textit{New York Times} article caught the eye of a New York–based poet named Bob Holman, who became passionately invested in bringing a slam to Manhattan. The first poetry slam in the Bowery District happened on August 20, 1988, after a masterly effort to fix the leaky roof of the historic Nuyorican Poet’s Café.\textsuperscript{175} At the same time, poet Gary Glazner is said to have taken slam out west to the historically poetic city of San Francisco, California. By 1991, poetry slam had a

\textsuperscript{173} Aptowicz, \textit{Words in Your Face}, 61
\textsuperscript{175} Aptowicz, \textit{Words in Your Face}, 24.
presence in Ann Arbor, Michigan and Boston, Massachusetts, with venues beginning to appear in southeastern states in 1992. Allan Wolf, poet and pioneering organizer from Asheville, North Carolina, informed me that there was no money at stake or career to build upon in these early days. Poetry slams belonged in niche bars and coffee shops, not schools or literary journals. However, even before spoken word exploded into a worldwide multimedia phenomenon, it is important to point out that the architects of this multicultural movement are often limited to the contributions of these white male organizers and institutional stakeholders.

While slam may have started as a parlor game in the late 1980’s, the second and third generations of artists entering the slam arena saw an explosion of youth organizations dedicated to hosting slam competitions for teens. Adult festivals such as the National Poetry Slam and Southern Fried Poetry Slam were barely breaking even financially in the 2000s, meanwhile a number of start-up nonprofit organizations such as YouthSpeaks, Louder Than a Bomb, Urban Word, and Get Lit-Words Ignite were growing into multimillion-dollar institutions, with professionally constructed curricula appearing in thousands of schools around the world. I used to be one of countless teens who grew up loving the gritty content of poems in the 1990s, and now, a generation later, an entire industry was marketing “engaging” content toward youth. Though slam was always thought to be a youthful movement—a fresh rejection of the old fogies peddling New Criticism in the academy—suddenly, slam was a bonafide youth movement. This is how the value system of the culture can shift from deferring to whatever the “old heads” say to focusing on youth critique as a driving force for pedagogy.

Before returning my attention to the student uprising of Slam Camp, it is important to point out that poets have historically used slam spaces to stage art in the form of disruption. For example, I witnessed a poetry slam festival transform into a protest when I attended my first National Poetry Slam in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 2005. Organizers claim that an unprecedented twenty

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thousand audience members attended the four-day festival and when the Albuquerque team made
the final round, thousands of New Mexico citizens packed the KIVA auditorium to cheer on the
local squad. Competitors from the Charlotte and Hollywood teams claimed that some audience
members were booing them during their performance. According to the organizers of the event:

   The performances were stellar from all the teams, and the competition stayed tied through
   the final round. When the winner was declared and Albuquerque went to claim their trophy,
   two of the teams stood with arms crossed into Xs, while Queen Sheba of Charlotte acted as
   spokesperson to express the teams’ distress.¹⁷⁷

Several members of the demonstration were temporarily banned from all Poetry Slam, Inc. events,
and Albuquerque would never bid to host another NPS.

While social disruption is arguably a long-standing quality of spoken word poetry, it is
interesting to consider how these protests suggested the shifting values and attitudes of artists over
time. Another example of protest is the summer of 2013, when the spoken word community had its
own erupting #MeToo movement, years before the highly publicized controversies that took place in
the artistic worlds of stand-up comedy, film, and music. In his book Killing Poetry, Johnson explains
that the finals auditorium erupted in hisses and boos when a team took the stage during the pre-
competition showcase, featuring a member accused of raping another poet.¹⁷⁸ While some poets
dismissed the protest as “poor sportsmanship,” the disruption forced us as a community to consider
how our actions worked to erase the narratives of women in the poetry slam scene. The action
encouraged witnesses to believe and listen to women, and reconsider the possible ways we have
reinforced the narratives of rape culture in literary spaces. Regardless of our individual stances on
protesting artists onstage, the community as a collective agreed on one thing: we failed in our promise

¹⁷⁷ McAllister et al., A Bigger Boat, 235.
¹⁷⁸ Javon Johnson, Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities (New Brunswick: Rutgers
University Press, 2017), 78.
to provide everyone a “safe space,” and should instead focus on providing a “brave space,” where stakeholders actively work toward ridding the shared space of sexual violence and misogyny.

I hope this context helps explain a scenario in which a multiracial coalition of teenage artists could seize control of a performance space occupied by a problematic elder white man. The irony of this dynamic is that it had always been Smith himself that encouraged the audience to make the slam space their own, emphasizing that the ego of the artist on stage is secondary. Considering the gravity of the CUPSI incident in 2017, Parakala writes: “It must have been surreal for Marc Smith—the man who believes that the show is everything, the audience is king, and ‘the greatest thing for a young artist is to be booed.’” Though many people encouraged Smith to apologize, he never did. Smith’s refusal to address the incident with humility was disappointing to me, because it stood at odds with the social contract of the emcee spiel. Upon hearing the name Marc Smith during the construction worker narrative, familiar audiences traditionally shout, “So what!” at the stage. This tongue-in-cheek practice was even promoted by the man himself at the historic slam at The Green Mill Lounge. The call-and-response practice presents the history of slam as a dueling set of counternarratives: a sanctioned voice establishes that it is important for the audience to know about Smith, a socialist working-class artist from Uptown Chicago, and an unsanctioned voice questions why the audience should give a proverbial shit. The move reinforces the foundational idea of slam that aims to privilege the experiences of the audience over any of the performers on stage.

In 2012, I hosted the first Slam Camp, along with poets Sierra DeMulder and Cuban Hernandez. Slam Camp is a week-long academy for high school–aged writers interested in poetry slam. Our curriculum focuses on the development of reading, writing, and revision skills, as well as developing embodied performance, microphone etiquette, “slam strategy,” and other skills relevant to

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180 Parakala, “Architect.”
181 Somers-Willett, *Cultural Politics*, 149.
competitive spoken word artists. Slam Camp has taken place at colleges and universities across the United States, including in Minnesota, Indiana, and Florida. Our academy has grown exponentially since its inception, hosting seven students in 2012, fourteen students in 2013, thirty students in 2014, sixty students in 2015, and eighty students in 2016. There were many efforts to make Slam Camp as cost affective as possible for families in need, and thanks to a scholarship program we saw minor increases in the enrollment of Black students and students of color. Regardless of our attempts, our culturally diverse faculty typically concludes in post-mortem discussions that the student body of Slam Camp is “very white,” and we often leave the academy wondering what other steps we can take to recruit diverse students.

Over the years our faculty would include numerous artists such as Rudy Francisco, Neil Hilborn, Giddy Perez, Hieu Minh Nguyen, Olivia Gatwood, Khary Jackson, Melissa Lozada-Oliva, Ashlee Haze, G Yamazawa, Donte Collins, Heather “Hero” Wells, and graduate notable artists such as Blythe Baird, Jamal Parker, and Miss K. These are the names of brilliant artists who have carried the torch of legacy to make slam as influential as it is today. It was during our fifth annual camp, in 2016, when my students pulled my proverbial card. The disruption of my summer academy forced me to ask the question: in what ways have the voices of poets of color been erased by my actions too?

**ERASURE AS CONFRONTATION**

There is a writing activity we practice at Slam Camp called erasure. According to the Academy of American Poets: “Erasure poetry, also known as blackout poetry, is a form of found poetry wherein a poet takes an existing text and erases, blacks out, or otherwise obscures a large portion of the text, creating a wholly new work from what remains.”[^182] The entry goes on to explain that erasure is often used as a means of confrontation, “a challenge to a pre-existing text.” For example, in 2017 a White

House aid named Stephen Miller dismissed Emma Lazarus’s poem “The New Colossus” while unveiling a racist immigration policy in a press briefing. In response, editors from the Guardian asked twenty-one poets to write a poem they thought Donald Trump would like to see at the base of the Statue of Liberty.183 Poet Hanif Abdurraqib created an erasure poem entitled:

Lazarus

Give me your poor
huddled masses yearning to breathe
The wretched refuse of
home, tempest
beside the golden door

Literary critic Parul Sehgal offered a separate definition of erasure that seems relevant to consider, saying it “refers to the practice of collective indifference that renders certain people and groups invisible.”184 Sehgal conceptualized erasure as the violence of dismissal, arguing that often the historical contributions of women and people of color are “blotted out” in dominant narratives. In the final section of this article, I consider erasure in both its definitions by returning to the site of Slam Camp. The history of poetry slam impels stakeholders to consider the power of stories, and therefore, I believe that reflecting on my own acts of erasure is in line with Kendi’s interrogative practice of anti-racism.

At Slam Camp, students often practiced the poetic art of erasure using text authored by dead writers. Erasure is political in nature because “there is a desire to re-examine the institutions and narratives that shape Americans’ lives, from government bureaucracy to new media.”185 The process of blotting out a canonical text creates a shift in power, because erasure transforms an existing text

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into a dialogue between an elder and younger poet. Notably, often the younger poet gets to reassign meaning. During one lesson, students took black Sharpie markers to pages of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, constructing their own new text through the destruction of an old one.\textsuperscript{186} Erasure impelled writers at Slam Camp to consider art as a form of disruption, and given its political nature we often facilitated the lesson the same day as my lecture on poetry and civic engagement.

I had given some variation of the lecture the previous three years of Slam Camp, and it was always one of the most popular discussions. So, what went wrong in the summer of 2016? How did a home-run lesson plan turn into an error? I think it is important to say I expressed hesitance about the lecture to my colleagues. I do not say this now to be dismissive or absolve myself, because my students felt silenced regardless. Rather, it is important to accurately reconsider my decision-making processes as an educator so that we can reflect on both immediately evident mistakes, as well as mistakes that became apparent in hindsight.

One reason I felt I was not equipped for the lecture is because I was facing new administrative tasks as the director of Slam Camp. In four years, we grew from a humble size of seven students and three counselors to a large academy of eighty students and fifteen counselors, meaning I had to spend a lot more time outside the classroom. That year we also moved from a small liberal arts college to a large Research 1 university and I had to take extra administrative duties in the transition. In short, my mind was distracted by insurance forms and purchase orders. Two errors are evident here. First, I was not in an appropriate mental state to foster a critical conversation on race and gender. Research shows that busyness can impede creative thinking,\textsuperscript{187} which is troublesome because these critical processes are necessary components of arts-based learning. Second, I had not put in the necessary time for


relationship building in the classroom. This may be an obvious oversight to some educators, but remember that a lot of spoken-word events function somewhat like explosive meet-and-greets: often a poet from a faraway place is brought into a learning space to publicly stage their perspectives in front of strangers. Obviously, that practice was not successful here. Building relationships is an important component to fostering culturally competent spaces, and clearly I had not done the necessary work to build trust between myself and my students.

Another reason I was probably not the appropriate person to facilitate the lecture is because the growth of our academy meant the demographics of the audience had shifted. Though we worked to make Slam Camp as affordable as possible, the cost of travel and tuition was an investment for many families. A majority of our students were white teenage girls from upper-middle-class families, and over the years we made efforts to improve the diversity of our student body by raising funds for scholarships and travel stipends. In 2016, we hosted students from thirty different states and succeeded in raising funds to provide scholarships for students from low-income families. We increased the number of minority students at our academy, but in terms of actual representation, we still had a ratio where 4 out of 5 of our participants identified as white teen girls. This meant that despite our efforts, we were still fostering a conversation about intersectionality in a racially homogenous space. According to Kendi, “A space is racialized when a racial group is known to either govern the space or make up the clear majority of the space.” Recognizing the optics of the situation, I invited another counselor to the front of the lecture hall to add to the conversation, and asked other counselors if they would chime in. However, in hindsight this move was a half measure. My body was still the body centered in the class. My voice was still the one directing the discourse.

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189 Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 169
Positioning my identity and stance as the vehicle for the lecture proved to be as problematic as I feared. This foresight suggests a number of ways a student might feel erased in this lesson. In addition to these optics, students highlighted two statements that I made. To appreciate the gravity of my words, I have conceptualized my phrases through the practice of erasure. I was attempting to foster a discussion on the relationship between power and whiteness. I am sure I am being kind to myself in my paraphrasing, but, essentially, I said:

As a white organizer in a multicultural arts community, I have to be thoughtful of my own white privilege and how it affects my perspectives. Now, I have some friends in the poetry community who call me an honorary Black person, as a joke. And while feeling included makes me smile, I know that they aren’t being earnest. We may have equal standing on the stage, but I know as soon as I leave the poetry venue that I get all my privileges back. I can hail a cab, get a bank loan, and don’t have to fear police.

Ask any teacher, and they will tell you that students listen in both careful and careless ways. In my experience, my students might ignore what I am saying, but they rarely mishear me. Erasure can strip away the words that did not carry as much weight to my students.

A Black student left the lecture hall in a hurry, but in my mind I reasoned that maybe they had to go to the bathroom. I continued on, obtusely, attempting to comment on the white-industrial savior complex, a tired trope some white poets use to “perform” their allyship in public. I had a book in my hand as if it granted me extra credibility. I continued my lecture:

I am leery of white performers who use a benevolent tone to tell stories about helping people of color. I think these stories undermine the efforts of organizers from minority communities. As a white person, I don’t think it is my responsibility to help Black people. I think it is my

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responsibility to help white people build a less racist society, which will create a more equitable world for Black people and people of color.

I did not mean. I did not mean. I did not mean, no matter. My careless words made young wonderers feel invisible.

As a white person, I don’t think it is my responsibility to help Black people.

The lecture ended when a counselor informed the class that several students had congregated in the atrium. They wanted a platform to be heard. So they claimed the space of the lecture hall and wrote “Occupy Slam Camp” on the board.

After students took turns sharing the hurt I caused them, they gave me a turn to speak. I stood, and said I am sorry. I said their feelings were valid and that it did not matter what my intentions were. I promised to learn from this and do better. I cried, and when other white students in the audience saw me cry, I guess they felt that allowed them to cry too.

Later that day, when the lecture hall was cleared, I found a note a student left in my copy of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* that I referenced in the lecture. The letter accused me of breaking my promise. That I promised a “safe space” for students, and then I snatched it away from them. The note said that I stole their voices.

I wrote this article to help artists and teachers rethink their stance as gatekeepers and curators of culture. I don’t know what lessons Marc Smith has learned, but my mistakes have made me reconsider the spaces around me and my sense of belonging in them. Some students said my apology wasn’t enough, and I did not disagree with them. I have apologies that are harder to offer.

To my students: I am sorry I thought big words could supersede your experiences. I am sorry I assumed the authority to tell stories that are not mine. I am sorry I did not share the stage. I am sorry
for turning the culture into a collection of names and dates to learn in a class. I am sorry for being so stuck on the construction-worker story. I am sorry this essay failed to decenter the white profiteers from the story of slam. I am sorry that I cannot say whether Marc’s Smith’s name should be struck from the spiel. I am sorry I don’t know if we should erase his legacy or confront it. In saying sorry, I offer an erasure of my own.

When you get up the mountain
the next one up
Then

knowing the human force it took
To bring you here.
Bibliography


Memoria, Verdad, y Justicia: Commemorative Acts of Solidarity for Memory, Truth, and Justice in South America

JesAlana Stewart

Abstract:

On March 24, 2016, a national holiday of Remembrance took place in Argentina as a means of commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of los desaparecidos (the disappeared ones). This holiday is a day to remember those who have been lost due to terrorism of the state, to celebrate the end of a murderous military coup, and to come together to demonstrate against past, current, and future crimes against humanity. Of the many groups that come in celebration and protest, none are as renowned or as influential as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. These women spoke out against the military regime when it was most dangerous to do so and gained invaluable steps against infringements on human rights. Thus, this organization became an example for others who fight on a global scale against the disappearances of loved ones, in turn amplifying a movement where individuals make and re-make their identities and activism through connection with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo across national and geographic boundaries. This movement, described in this work as Global Critical Solidarity, provides a framework for further investigation of human rights movements based in local contexts that are (re)made in digital spaces to reach global audiences, in turn developing a deep sense of kinship that has critical implications for the understanding of shared humanity through diversity.
THE POWER OF NARRATION

Words can have immeasurable power. Indeed, there is no force greater than that of the written or spoken word when used to bring together diverse communities. With this power people are able to state truths, to communicate needs, or even to spark change. It is with this power that the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo gained global recognition and became a symbol of hope for those who have experienced the tragedy of forced disappearances of loved ones.

In 2016, I was privileged to hear firsthand accounts and culturally imbued narratives of individuals who were part of the organization of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and that were touched by the tragedies that took place in Argentina over forty years ago. I saw the slogans of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo reach the farthest corners of the city of Buenos Aires and also span the globe through the World Wide Web in ways that brought their tragic history to life. Through the communication of this shared traumatic narrative and by means of these powerful slogans, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo keep the memory of their children alive, and they identify with others on a global scale who have experienced similar tragic loss. Finally, through the power of their words I was drawn to this organization, and due to their inherent desire as mothers to protect and prevent similar loss they then charged me with sharing this narrative via my privileged platform.\(^{191}\)

To achieve this task, I first provide context for why and how the Association of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo came to be. I then reiterate, as other scholars have done, this context in conversation with similar situations of human rights infringements across South America. In understanding the history of these disappearances and the similarities with which they occur, a pattern emerged where more and more individuals throughout all of Latin America and beyond sought out

\(^{191}\) Celia de Prósperi, in-person conversation with author, March 22, 2016.
the guidance of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. By expanding the purview of research from a local to a global context, I am able to shed light on a phenomenon of individuals reaching beyond geographic boundaries (both in person and digitally) to recognize the immense gains for human rights that the Mothers achieved and to seek validation in connection with this organization. I argue that in doing so, these individuals engage in a pilgrimage for kinship, or participate in what I call Global Critical Solidarity. It is through a critical ethnographic perspective that I work with participants to understand the context of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the (re)making of their slogans as a case study to argue the value of Global Critical Solidarity. Finally, I discover the invocation of these slogans in current events and take this as a case in point for the importance of this work.

THE ASSOCIATION OF THE MOTHERS OF THE PLAZA DE MAYO

In 1976, a period of civil unrest in Argentina, upwards of thirty thousand children disappeared (or, rather, were disappeared) due to a vicious military dictatorship called the “Junta.” The Junta, coming from the Spanish word *juntar* - to join - consisted of the army, navy, and air force of Argentina combined. As a result of the disappearances of loved ones, the sisters, wives, mothers, and grandmothers of those missing began to question the whereabouts of their families and the role of the government in these cases. These individuals began reporting their children as missing to police authorities. They also began frequenting political offices, seeking guidance from religious officials, and searched for answers from all organizations and leaders to whom they had access. At each organization, and with each query into the vanishing of their children, these Mothers would get the run-around. They were either instructed to come back tomorrow, or worse were told that their child had no existing records, and therefore must have never existed.

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After some time, the Mothers became familiar with others going through the same battle and they forged a bond. Through this new alliance, these Mothers decided that something more needed to be done; they needed to come together to find out the truth behind what happened to their children. This led to fourteen women gathering in the one human rights arena that they knew of the Plaza de Mayo.

The Plaza de Mayo was located in front of the presidential palace in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and was (and continues to be) a space where frequent displays of activism for human rights occur. These disillusioned Mothers gathered in this central location, defiantly in the face of political leaders, in the hopes that they could gain audience with those responsible, to learn of what came of their children. It is on this platform that the Mothers used their elocutionary powers to demand change in the government and recompense for the loss of their children, los desaparecidos.

At the Plaza de Mayo, these women would come together and talk about their disappeared loved ones. More people heard their stories and saw them at the plaza, and eventually, their cause began to grow. With this growth the Mothers saw a need for a uniform equal to that of the military regime. They decided that a baby’s cloth diaper would further connect them to their lost children, so they placed them upon their heads to create a headscarf, remaking this object into a symbol. This symbol perplexed passersby, providing an opening to even more avenues of powerful communication for these Mothers. Thus, the diaper wrapped around their heads re-made the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo into a powerful visual symbol, helping them recognize one-another, spreading word of the disappearance of their loved ones, and serving as a guiding light for others to join their cause (see figure 1).193

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Indeed, their cause grew so much that it became difficult to distinguish one *desaparecido* from another. So, the Mothers then embroidered the names of their children, the dates of their disappearances, and their slogan “Aparición con vida” on the symbolic white scarves, as a reminder both to themselves and to their society that what happened would never be forgiven or forgotten. They carried images of their children, often as large placards, or they wore them as large lockets around their necks. They would hold tightly to these images and tell their sorrows to any who would listen, while promenading in the faces of those who directly wronged their families and denied any knowledge of such actions. This activism eventually led to such a vast growth in numbers that in 1979 they became official as an “organization promoting democratic values”\(^{194}\) and fighting against the violation of human rights.

These brave women had insurmountable courage to demonstrate in this plaza because it was heavily guarded by military who were placed there as a means to diffuse any possible opposition to the Junta. Armed men demanded that the women not *gather* in the plaza, so instead they would walk

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defiantly around the plaza every Thursday at 3:30. The Mothers, under the protection of motherhood, were some of the only people to stand up successfully against the dictatorship at that time, despite the constant harassment of military authorities. They were able to do so by highlighting their virtue as mothers, a sacred role in many South American contexts, and by remaking this identity into one of political activism.

As the threat to the Junta grew, this military coup began to lash out against the Mothers. “The junta, which legitimated its mission with the rhetoric of Christian and family values, could hardly gun down defenseless mothers in public. So, it tried dismissing the Mothers as ‘crazy old women’ or locas and threatened the women individually in their homes and on their way to and from the Plaza.” The Mothers subverted this claim of locura or craziness by turning it on its head, remaking this assertion into a part of their identity by agreeing that indeed the loss of a child would drive anyone crazy. Thus, what was a historically successful tactic of using cultural norms and roles as a means to subjugate women, was ineffective since the Mothers used their status of motherhood to incorporate this slight as justification for their movement. Finally, the Junta began disappearing these women. As noted in the Los Angeles Times on the thirtieth anniversary of the disappeared in 2006, even some of the founding Mothers of the organization became another number in the list of the disappeared including Azucena Villaflor de De Vicente (figure 2, right), María Eugenia Ponce de Bianco (figure 2, middle), and Esther Ballestrino de Careaga (figure 2, left), and surely many others.


Diana Taylor, Making a Spectacle: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 100


Thornton, “Grief Transformed.”
Through their resolve and articulate *consignas* (slogans) these women were able to not only stand in the face of the Junta but also enact governmental change. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo are one of the few examples in history to not only stand in direct opposition to such a regime but also to gain ground against such human rights abuses. This successful use of words to make and remake the identities of these women has reverberated through both space and time as a call to others to join in the fight against infringement on human rights.

**INFRINGEMENTS ON HUMAN RIGHTS**

Many people around the world identified very closely with the words, actions, and activism of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, because they were able to rise beyond their context of extreme human rights infringements. Indeed, the infringements experienced in the context of Argentina in the mid to late 1970s and early 1980s should never have happened, as “only a handful of rights cannot be suspended according to the vital needs of national security, including: prohibitions on discrimination, torture, slavery, ex post facto punishment, and debtor’s prison as well as rights to life, freedom of thought, and personhood before the law… and the prohibition against genocide.”


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Figure 2. Poster of Mothers who were disappeared, displayed at Santa Cruz Church, Buenos Aires.
simply was not the case. The rights of the children of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo were grotesquely denigrated and virtually ignored, for the purpose of national security, according to the Junta. The military coups of the Junta used whatever means necessary to maintain control, including the persecution of their own people.

During the Junta regime, over thirty thousand people were taken. This number reflects children (typically young adults in their twenties and thirties, but some as young as thirteen years) who had family members left to fight for answers in their wake. This number does not account for those who were part of entire families that were taken, resulting in the possibility for more than forty-five thousand persons being disappeared. While this alone is devastating, knowing what actually happened to those who were disappeared is even more debilitating.

Those who were taken were ambushed in their own homes by plain-clothed officers who blocked off their streets with unregistered vehicles, ransacked their houses, and assaulted both those taken, and their family members left behind. Once taken, these poor souls were tortured for hours on end, then they were disposed of or disappeared in mass graves, by burning, by being thrown into the sea, or left roadside. Even those who, after torture, were viewed as innocent were still killed since that was an easier path than going through governmental channels of setting them free. Similarly, across South America, “death squad activity, routine torture by police and military forces, ‘disappearances,’ arbitrary arrests, secret prisons, and virtually indiscriminate massacres have been at various times, epidemic in Chile, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, El Salvador, Guatemala, Paraguay, and Bolivia.” Due to this disturbing history and these atrocities, “Latin American human rights
advocates are concerned about terrorism, abuse of civil-political rights, and social structural violence.” For these many reasons, those particularly from the South American context have found kinship with the Mothers.

**CRITICAL SOLIDARITY**

This kinship exists through a deep understanding of such traumatic experiences and infringements upon human rights that is shared not only in Argentina, but throughout South America. People began to look to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo for guidance on how to effectively destabilize similar regimes across these contexts. They would reach out to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who would, in turn, embrace them as mothers and as equals who similarly experienced the tragic loss of loved ones. It is this acceptance that has created a unique type of pilgrimage for those who have also endured the disappearance of family members. Many who have had dealt with the sudden disappearance of loved ones have traveled in search of kinship with the Mothers and have brought their fight to the symbolic location of the Plaza de Mayo.

Thus, people from varying contexts would travel to Buenos Aires, Argentina, in search of an appropriate platform for their cause and in hopes of finding solidarity with those who have suffered extreme loss. Solidarity in this sense, is not a simple feeling of kinship but rather is a *critical solidarity*—a concept ripe with subtle implications and that bares much more complex consideration. *Critical Solidarity* is more than a simple search for empathy; instead, it is the dialogic process of understanding that takes place between individuals who share similar experiences that comes from the culmination of the acknowledgement of loss, the reciprocal understanding of a shared traumatic pain, and which ultimately leads to a feeling of healing or hope of emancipation from the root cause of the trauma.

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The use of “critical” in the term *critical solidarity* means to say that there is an emancipatory potential between interlocutors that engages on multiple pragmatic horizons. People who travel in search of *critical solidarity* with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo make this pilgrimage in hopes that their subjectivity will be validated. They are looking for their normative understanding of tragic events to be understood and hope that these women will join them in solidarity both politically and emotionally on the basis of the traumatic shared experience of forced disappearances of loved ones. Furthermore, these victims recognize that the organization of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo have made great gains against human rights violations. Thus, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo have transformed from simply those who have experienced loss to stewards of kinship who, on a hermeneutical level, have transcended their original cause to become a beacon of solidarity, unity, and connection across boundaries.

**GLOBAL CRITICAL SOLIDARITY**

Indeed, this form of critical solidarity in the context of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, has grown from the local context of Argentina to a global movement where both the Mothers and people from around the world who have experienced a tragic loss come together to form emotional and political connections that guide them in the fight against the regimes that disappeared their loved ones, and to fight for the emancipation of all who are in need of justice for crimes against humanity.

With respect to critical solidarity, these people come from many places. “In addition to Argentina’s Mothers who formed their movement in 1977, mothers formed human rights movements in Chile in 1974, and around the same time, they emerged in Brazil, Uruguay, Guatemala, and Honduras. In 1981, a group appeared in El Salvador, and in 1990 they mobilized in Sri Lanka.”

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207 Malin, “Mother Who Won’t Disappear.”
Researchers estimate that approximately ninety thousand people from Latin America have been disappeared by malicious governments, and while these countries certainly find solidarity with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, they are not the only part of the world that shares the experience of the disappearance of a loved one.

In Sri Lanka, for example, since the 1980s nearly forty thousand disappearances have taken place. The military forces in Sri Lanka used tactics practically identical to those of the Junta in Argentina and have created similar unrest among the families of the disappeared. “In concentrating its repression on young people, the regimes in both Sri Lanka and Latin America created a critical mass of women who, despite class divisions and differences in life experiences and values had one thing in common: they were mothers of children who had disappeared.”208 These individuals/organizations from around the world have found Global Critical Solidarity, or a deep sense of belonging that engages interlocutors beyond national boundaries on multiple pragmatic levels with a strong symbol (in this case, the Association of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo), thereby creating the potential for deep healing and emancipation through a dialogic global kinship. They identify with the Mothers in Argentina because they too have experienced tragic crimes against humanity.

Thus, it is through the concept of Global Critical Solidarity situated within the context of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, that this research looks to not only represent the narrative of the Mothers but also to discover the ways other individuals make and remake their own identities and causes in kinship with the Mothers. This work hopes to shed light on Global Critical Solidarity as a valid lens through which to view current and future human rights campaigns as they converge across national borders. Finally, this work hopes to provide precedence of deep empathy and solidarity as important components to conducting and understanding research through kinship with those who

208 Ibid.
share personal traumatic narratives. This important work will do so by answering the following research questions:

1. In what discursive contexts do human rights campaigns of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo appear/reappear (orally, visually, digitally)?

2. In what ways do the human rights campaigns of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo expand beyond the geographic boundaries of Argentina to invite Global Critical Solidarity with other contexts?

**METHODODOLOGY: THE POWER OF CONTEXT**

When looking into global movements, particularly those with tragic underpinnings, it is imperative to understand the context from which the research evolves. This includes the local and global constructs and implications, the explicit positionality of the participants along with their demands as stakeholders in the research, and the researcher’s role as a dialogic entity throughout the course of the investigation. The various ways in which these three perspectives interact makes for the rich conditions of the research, and their continued engagement gives way to unique avenues for connection that bridge beyond the snapshot of insight provided by the research. Indeed, the interconnections discovered by this investigation in particular may pave the way for the repeated (re)making of this research as new phenomenon coincide with the first instance of this work.

In describing the particular context of this work, and regarding the local and global constructs and implications at play at the time of the investigation, it was made quite evident to the researcher that the local and global contexts were not only at odds with one another, but they led to a dichotomous positioning of the work itself. Indeed—

the noetic praxis of political theology in North America will involve an extensive collaboration within contexts characterized by a global perspective. A global perspective is intrinsic to political theology in the United States insofar as economic and political life in the United States is itself intrinsically global in its effects and consequences. There is also a theological reason for such a perspective: the concrete histories of suffering are simultaneously immanent in particular places and times and
by that very immanence transcend those particularities to become one with all victims throughout space and time.  

This brings attention to the bifurcated context of this work by acknowledging that these concrete histories of suffering have the potential to transcend the context in which they were originally created. Due to digital advancements, this is even more prominent, and such a context allows for a Global Critical Solidarity to form, where all victims of similar tragedies find solace in and through a dialogic process of making and remaking their identities in conversation with others who have been similarly wronged. It also, however, discusses the role of the United States in relation to these global perspectives as an enactor, which highlights another unique aspect of this research that emerged due to the researcher being from the United States.

The knowledge of the participants that they were interacting with an investigative team (albeit on individual research projects) from the United States, brought to the foreground both distrust of and discomfort with the credibility and motives for the various research projects. This shows the interaction among the local and global realities of this work, the participants’ understanding and personal experiences within those realities, and their acceptance (or not) of the researchers’ positionalities all in conversation with one another.

THE POWER OF EMPATHY: THE WHY

The concept of Global Critical Solidarity is also supremely important in understanding researcher motives for undertaking investigative work. Researchers should engage in such critical work, which “cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity; therefore it cannot unfold in the antagonistic relations between oppressors and oppressed. No one

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can be authentically human while he prevents others from being so.”\textsuperscript{210} This resonates deeply with my positionality as a researcher.

All researchers should make explicit their positionality within research, because “our responsibilities should lie in how we frame, approach, and attend to the constantly fluctuating dynamics being researched and how the research is exacting impacts.”\textsuperscript{211} This sense of responsibility, this consideration not only for the context of the work but for the lasting impact on the individuals with whom I met and the relationships that I, as a researcher, built with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, catalyzed the forward movement of this work.

This work began as a simple analysis of digital invocations of slogans for an introductory course on Spanish pragmatics. I quickly discovered, however, how deeply moved I was by my own personal connections to Argentina and by my admiration for the Mothers. This sense of solidarity only grew, the more I saw individuals across the globe (re)making the slogans of the Mothers to fit their own heart-wrenching contexts (to be seen in further detail in this work). Finally, I had the opportunity to meet the Mothers in person during a week-long trip to Argentina where I was able to connect, listen (and really hear), and practice deep empathy with this research context and these individuals directly, to stand in solidarity with them despite our differences.

At first, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo had no interest in meeting with a group of researchers from the United States. This was in large part due to the aforementioned socially imbued research context that was laden with the historical background of the role of the United States in militia regimes in South America. Indeed, I experienced contrasting perspectives, hesitance, and at times anger with the presence of Americans (including the presence of the investigative team, myself,

\textsuperscript{210} Paulo Freire, \textit{Pedagogy of the Oppressed} (New York: Herder and Herder 1970), 85

\textsuperscript{211} Leigh Patel, \textit{Decolonizing Educational Research: From Ownership to Answerability} (New York: Routledge, 2015), 59
and U.S. President Barack Obama in Argentina) during their celebratory commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of los desaparecidos.

However, it was through my identity—or in other words, the combination of being a woman, being fluent in Spanish, being a privileged academic, and being an individual from the United States who demonstrated openly the ability to listen and forge a deep sense of community with the mothers through a critical solidarity—that I was given audience with one of the founding members of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Celia de Prósperi (known affectionately as La Chela, may she rest in peace, 1925–2018). During my conversation with her, she told me about her daughter and said her story was and is the story of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, she said we remember them (the collective disappeared) by telling this story and it was my responsibility to bring the story to my people.\textsuperscript{212}

The weight of this responsibility touches me to this day. I recognize that as a researcher it is imperative to (re)assess my own subjectivity and ethical stance and to measure my resolve so as to represent the research context and participants in their own words as accurately and as fully as possible. Therefore, in an attempt to maintain this viewpoint, this work is not simply written about the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, but with them and with those who sought Global Critical Solidarity with these women both in person and digitally during the time of this research.

**THE POWER OF DIALOGIC RESEARCH: THE HOW**

As a researcher, I also understand the need to demonstrate a concrete methodology to prove the rigor of the investigation at large. However, I take issue with the idea that social science research, in particular, must follow similar or the same methods as STEM work to achieve replicability and validity. This fallacy in thinking often undermines the purpose of humanities work. Rather than simply accepting a hard and fast method, this work relies on Critical Ethnographic Perspective as guiding

\textsuperscript{212} Celia de Prósperi, in-person conversation with author, March 22, 2016.
principles or a meta-theory through which the research operates, as a means to not only provide flexibility of methodology but also to further question the Western-centric model through the words of the Mothers themselves. This type of work involved gathering data through qualitative measures consistent with ethnographic traditions such as observations, field-notes, and interviews, and contextual analysis to triangulate the data to represent the full context of both previous and current human rights endeavors taking place through these powerful commemorative speech acts. Finally, this meta-theory encourages a dialogic process between the researcher and the research through reflexivity and awareness of self-positionality within the context of inquiry.

This reflexivity of context meant taking into consideration human rights research in tandem with the slogans of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and resulting hashtags (that were created by and were continually influenced through the work of this organization) and exploring the power of these words (for the Mothers and others) as they became exemplar to those experiencing similar tragedies. Thus, prior to the researcher’s departure for the week-long commemoration in Argentina, various hashtag slogans used by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo were analyzed via social media (primarily Twitter) over the course of the year leading up to the commemoration. This was done through pragmatic analysis of archival data (Twitter data) or artifacts, “in terms of the participant’s context models of their own political identities, roles, goals, actions and beliefs.” This entails the digital representations of slogans, public displays of slogans, investigation of rights claims in previous academic texts in Argentina, and field notes of conversations/visual representations of these consignas.

Initial findings from these digital slogans were then compared with human rights campaigns both seen and heard (and then documented with field notes and photographs) in Argentina during

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the commemorative events that took place the week of the fortieth anniversary of the desaparecidos on the national holiday of Remembrance on March 24, 2016. Throughout the week, I collected and catalogued (through groupings of times and locations) the data from participants who consented to observations and interviews, and who provided artifacts such as pictures of locations and organization slogans, posters, pamphlets, magazines, fliers, schedules, and more. During semi-structured interviews (that either involved detailed field notes or audio/video recordings depending on the wishes of the participants), I explicitly asked individuals to describe in their own words what the intended meanings were of these various human rights campaigns. The culmination of this week took place on Thursday the 24th of March 2016, which was the national holiday of Remembrance marking the fortieth year since the desaparecidos were first taken. It happened to fall on a Thursday, the day of the week that the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo would typically march. On this day, they held a large procession that concluded at the Plaza de Mayo (see figure 3).

Finally, upon return to the United States, guided member-checks took place, when possible, where the investigator followed up with individuals to ensure both accuracy and accountability in tandem with even more artifactual collection via social media for further triangulation of this work.

Figure 3. Arial photo of the thousands of people demonstrating in the Plaza de Mayo on May 24, 2016.
The cumulative and longitudinal data gathered across digital and real-time platforms not only constitutes the critical ethnographic perspective presented here but also validates Global Critical Solidarity as a viable construct worth further investigation. Finally, through these rigorous means of investigation, this study strives to represent wholly the tumultuous setting in which such language was (re)produced, which included the researcher.

The analysis of data included contemplative conversation with researcher-participants, extensive data coding and interpretation, transcription of interviews, observation notes and reflections, and theoretical underpinnings of critical ethnography to gain an understanding of the Global Critical Solidarity with a human rights lens. Additionally, all photographs and transcripts were grouped together based on location of data collection and research question theme, which gave another perspective on the context of these slogans so that a final round of analysis of these words took place, adding reliability to the study overall. Finally, this research has compared social media to the data collected on the same theme, essentially connecting each of these slogans across geographic boundaries to the cultures and contexts in which they invoke Global Critical Solidarity.

THE POWER OF CONNECTION: THE WHO

Since this research was conducted both digitally and in person in Argentina, while in collaboration with other ongoing research projects, the participant pool was as diverse as the research interests taking place. Participants in Argentina included perspectives as vast as founding voices of the organization of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a law firm working on the reparations for families of the disappeared, actual family members of the disappeared, religious leaders, educators, and pedestrians from various countries marching in commemoration of the fortieth anniversary. This participant pool even included people who traveled from as far as Mexico and Brussels in critical solidarity with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Argentine people. These organizations
and/or people agreed not only to speak with the researchers but to also provide access to others, including close and distant relatives of the disappeared ones and/or leaders of various political groups. Furthermore, digital participants were included through their publicly accessible words on social media. These individuals came from all across the globe to show their solidarity with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.

**FINDINGS: THE POWER OF MEMORY, TRUTH, AND JUSTICE**

In response to the first research question, “In what discursive contexts do human rights campaigns of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo appear/reappear (orally, visually, digitally)?”, this work parsed out some of the rhetoric used by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and which was adopted by various others. This helped to gain insight into how this organization relates to people on a deeper emotional and critical level. These slogans were seen in various forms across a very diverse linguistic landscape not only during the event of the fortieth anniversary, but also leading up to and following this event. They spanned both physical and electronic dimensions and were shared or reposted multiple times for varying audiences and across geographic boundaries. Each slogan is intended to highlight particular information or goals from past trials and tribulations through Memoria, Verdad, y Justicia (memory, truth, and justice) to bring together diverse people with one common goal for the betterment of the future. These slogans include: “40 años del golpe militar” (40 years of military coup); “30 Mil Razones/Presentes” (30 thousand reasons/present); “Nunca Más” (never again); and “Aparición con vida” (appearance with life).215

Due to the unique time of this celebration being exactly forty years later, this particular number was represented as important both orally and visually through the slogan “40 años del golpe militar” (40 years of military coup). People used this phrase most frequently to demonstrate that the fight is a

215 All translations in this section are my own.
continuation. This sentence establishes that the struggle has never ceased, and that this history defines Argentinians. This number was used frequently to show events that took place at the commemorative celebration (see figure 3) and was used as both a nod to and a procession for history.

By far one of the most emotionally embedded messages that emanated throughout the week and at the commemoration was the phrase “30 Mil Razones” or “30 Mil Presentes” (30 thousand reasons/present). During the presentation given by the Organization of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo at the celebration in the Plaza de Mayo on March 24, this consigna rang through the crowd. The Mothers on stage would call out “¡30 mil personas desaparecidos!” and the mass of people responded “¡presente!”, then they would yell “vive” (alive) from the stage and the congregation sang “siempre” (always). This was one of the many forms in which this particular phrase was witnessed. Other forms included extensive street art, posters and handouts displayed and distributed on the streets and at the university, and online images (see figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4. Photo of graffiti in the street with 30000. Figure 5. with 30MIL.

Perhaps the most iconic phrase used in tandem with the Mothers of the plaza de mayo is “Nunca Más” (never again). This quote shows the angst of what happened and the fight to prevent such atrocities from ever taking place again (see figure 6). It uses the sentiment that never again could we (humanity) allow something so tragic to take place; never again, can we be silent in the face of atrocious human rights violations; and never again can we forget what took place forty years ago. This
particular invocation is certainly the most widely used and (re)made *consigna* of the Mothers (to be further discussed in the Implications section of this work).

![Image of Nunca mas](image)

*Figure 6. Vivid visual of “Nunca mas,” never again.*

Finally, one of the most influential of all the consignas (slogans) of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo was “Aparición con vida” or “appearance with life” which the Organization of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo explain in detail within their own collectable magazine:

Quizás previendo que sus hijos o hijas no volverían físicamente con ellas, en la frase denunciaban para siempre el carácter terrorista y criminal de un Estado que fue autor de las desapariciones, que conseguía sin devolver con vida a los secuestrados y que, por añadidura, era perfectamente incapaz de juzgar a los responsables. Nunca iban a aceptar la muerte de sus hijos; menos aún iban a ser ellas quienes los dieran por fallecidos a cambio de una pensión. Nunca iban a permitir que el Estado que los desapareció se librara tan fácilmente de sus culpas, declarándolos muertos.216 *(Perhaps anticipating that their sons or daughters would never physically return to them, in this phrase, they forever denounce the terrorist and criminal nature of a State that was author to the disappearances, that persevered without returning hostages alive and that, moreover, was perfectly incapable of prosecuting those who were responsible. The Mothers would never accept the death of their children; fewer still would be the ones who would give them up as dead in exchange for a pension. Never would they allow a State who disappeared them to liberate so easily from their sins, in declaring them dead.)*

This particular phrase has been used as a symbol for nearly forty years now and was both heard and seen by the researcher. These words were printed and published, highlighted in artwork, and appeared various times online. For example, the phrase was seen prominently posted on the wall of the historic office of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, on a poster that states “Aparición con vida,

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“Justicia, Castigo a culpables” (appearance with life, justice, punish those responsible) (see figure 7). Additionally, this invocation has been repurposed to represent not only the original context of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, but also for disappearances that occurred later, and in other countries. Thus, this slogan can be viewed as an exemplar invocation that represents the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and their identity as an organization, particularly since it has reached beyond the Argentinian context across spatial and temporal boundaries, which attends to the second research question: In what ways do the human rights campaigns of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo expand beyond the geographic boundaries of Argentina to invite critical solidarity with other contexts?

In response to this research question, an overwhelming amount of data suggests that the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo are a symbol not only for Argentina but for nearly all of South America. This was seen not only in person on March 24 at the Plaza de Mayo but also digitally in the Twittersphere. This goes to show that this organization has crossed both geographic and political boundaries to invoke a sense of Global Critical Solidarity and justice for Spanish-speaking communities that have experienced similar human rights offenses and military regimes. For example, toward the end of the ceremony for the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo on March 24, they allowed other organizations from various places to march to the plaza with their own agenda to announce at
this historic site. One of these organizations included a group from Mexico, who flew all the way from Central America to Buenos Aires to show critical solidarity with this context and to bring their fight to an international scale, where their cause would be recognized globally. A leader of this group directly stated in an interview that these people see direct similarities to the disappearances in Argentina and those from the Ayotzinapa University in Mexico (see figure 8).

Three young adults were also waving three different flags (Mexican, Argentinian, and a symbolic flag for indigenous communities) representing their solidarity with both each other and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (see figure 9). Furthermore, online were several Latin American countries represented in solidarity with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. For example, one person who was both physically at the commemoration also posted on Twitter, stating “#Uruguay presente” with their Uruguayan flag in a tweet showing Global Critical Solidarity with Argentina (see figure 10).
Beyond critical solidarity with countless Spanish-speaking communities, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and their context have bridged linguistic barriers as well. For example, commemorating the fortieth anniversary of Los Desaparecidos was a gentleman holding a sign in Portuguese, stating “não vai ter golpe” (there will be no blow) to show critical solidarity and speak out against military violence (see figure 11). Additionally, a gentleman was using English to express nostalgia for an era when Cristina was the Argentinian president (see figure 12).

IMPLICATIONS: (RE)MAKING IDENTITIES THROUGH GLOBAL CRITICAL SOLIDARITY

Just as la Chela had hoped, this work has highlighted instances where the stories of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo have not only continued the narrative of their children through deeply
personal levels of connection, but they have further advanced the causes of others who experienced infringements upon their human rights. These individuals have found connection through tragedy, and they have experienced global critical solidarity. This work has shed light on this phenomenon.

Indeed, people are (re)making the narratives of the Mothers in such a way that their history becomes relevant to us all. The Mothers set a precedence and demonstrated that silence is not a choice. They showed up for their children, just as people are now speaking out in solidarity for memory, truth, and justice with those who were disappeared or were even more visibly killed outright in the streets.

Even now, on June 20, 2020, the Mothers are seeing and will continue to see the fruits of their labor as the rejection of infringements on human rights continues to grow through more connections to their slogans. People are invoking the slogans of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo alongside the #BlackLivesMatter movement as a means of (re)making their powerful elocutionary speech acts in kinship with individuals who have suffered grotesque infringement upon their rights as humans. Yet again, people are taking the Mothers’ words and repurposing them through global critical solidarity to demonstrate that they too are showing up and standing with others who have suffered highly traumatic experiences, and they too are stewards of solidarity.

Take, for example, Figure 13. This post exhibits deep forms of global critical solidarity and intersectionality. It invokes #Nuncamas, its French counterpart #PlusJamaisCa, #BlackLivesMatter, #justiceforgeorgesfloyd [sic] and many more, all while showing a staggering visual of protest in France. This is also highlighted by figure 14, where #Nuncamas was used to show solidarity with other lives lost due to police brutality, for simply being Black or for simply being Trans. These were the contexts for the murders of George Floyd in the United States, Adama Traoré in France, and Dilan Cruz and Alejandra Monocuco in Colombia.
While several studies have looked into the atrocious crimes against humanity that took place in Argentina from 1977 to 1983, this research joined this particular conversation to add depth to a global phenomenon currently taking place through the idea of Global Critical Solidarity. This concept carries supreme importance when considering vast international connections, and the similarities of human rights infringements that have taken place and continue to occur across geographic boundaries. In this work, it is evident that, seen through the lens of Global Critical Solidarity, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo have stood as examples, as stewards for advancements in human rights, and as beacons of hope despite coming from such bleak circumstances. Through the use of critical ethnography and the concept of Global Critical Solidarity, difficult topics such as forced disappearances and overt police brutality across the globe can be researched with sensitivity and move us toward the potential for hermeneutic emancipation and recognition of gross infringements upon human rights. Lastly, I stand with the Mothers, I stand with Black colleagues, and through this research I stand in my belief that empathy as made possible through Global Critical Solidarity can (re)make these narratives until their stories are finally universally heard and may be laid to rest alongside la Chela and her daughter, in peace.
Bibliography:


Memory: Juba Four Years After Leaving

Maria Hamilton Abegunde

Abstract

What happens when we are unmade not by an “urban process” but by an urban process itself being unmade by war? On March 8, 2016, I arrived in Juba, South Sudan, to teach, three years after the beginning of the civil war and in the middle of tenuous peace agreements. Even if I had studied South Sudan for years, I would not have been prepared for what happened to me. This essay is a poetic reflection on how Juba unmade me and forced me to reconsider my relationship with the world. It is part of my commitment to make visible how poetic inquiry and auto-ethnography are essential to making academic scholarship accessible to the public, especially for artist-scholar-activists who directly confront trauma and who need to find sustainable ways to reclaim the pieces of themselves that get lost/left at their sites of research.

“…we must first reflect on how we have been made and re-made throughout history by an urban process impelled onward by powerful social forces.”217

“When are you coming to Africa? We need that healing there.”218

In the same way that we rarely pay attention to what makes a poem and why, we rarely pay attention to how and why a city makes and unmakes us, or why we love or not love it—sometimes in the same day. We may, in fact, lack the desire or knowledge to question the “powerful social forces”—


218 The question a South Sudanese woman asked me in 2014 after hearing me talk about my research and healing work to the fifteen South Sudanese women who were finishing their Master’s in Education at IU.
or the historical and political—that contribute to our inability to contemplate how and why we are connected to a city. Questioning may lead to unexpected answers and change the relationship we have with the city of our choice, and most importantly, the relationship we have with ourselves.

What happens, though, when we are unmade not by the “urban process” but by an urban process itself being unmade by war or armed conflict? This is not to say that the creation of cities is not a war. But this essay is not a discussion of urbanization or war, how both restrict or eliminate the freedoms of citizens, or how both create exclusionary practices and policies that punish collective actions for change and, yes, freedom. It is a poetic reflection about how Juba, the capitol city of South Sudan, unmade me and forced me to reconsider my relationship with the world.

Before moving forward, let me answer the question that you want to ask: Why use poetry to translate my teaching and research experiences? Faulkner uses the term “research poetry” to situate poetry and the writing of poems as part of the research process. Poetry as methodology encourages co-created and collaborative work between researchers and the communities with whom they work. Research poetry results in a “participant-voiced work” that is not limited to the researcher’s field notes. It may include journaling and reflection from both researcher and community. And, it allows the researcher to use auto-ethnography to interpret and analyze their data in ways that are more accessible to a wider audience, and that remember and honor the contributions of the people who form the basis of their research. Faulkner writes that “…many poet-researchers consider poetry as an excellent means to present data about the human experience and consider poetry an ideal way to capture and present this experiences in a more easily “consumable,” powerful, emotionally poignant, and accurate form than prose research reports.”

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219 When Henri Lefebvre first put forth “the right to the city” in 1968, he argued for the city to be a collective space for all citizens, one that was co-created and from which no one was excluded.

Bill Moyers writes in *The Language of Life*, one of the earlier texts to consider how poetry creates a communal experience for writer and reader through its performance and its ability to reveal the connections between poet and audience, that "Poetry is news—news of the mind, news of the heart—and in the reading and hearing of it, poet and audience are fused. Strangers converge but community emerges, the shared experience of being present when poetry reveals a particular life to be every life—my life, your life, you, me, us." Moyers goes on to write that during one evening while listening to poetry at the Dodge Festival he “…was struck by how much we owe our poets for reminding us that experience is the most credible authority of all.”

In his essay on memory and the slave trade, David Blight says this another way: “We should respect the poets and priests; we should study the defining myths at play in any memory controversy.” I am a poet and I am a priest. I went to Africa and, now, I too need healing. But, I also want to share with the world my memories of a Juba, South Sudan, that they will likely never see in the news. After Juba, I was/am/will be forever untethered and tattered. I do not know if the pieces of that self will be re-made seamlessly into the me you might one day meet. For now, I offer her to you unashamedly threadbare. Like Juba, I am at war with internal forces I cannot control. That means this essay is disjointed and incomplete: my memory to reconstruct a self who does not exist relies on notes, and are channeled through a deep grief for and of a people and city I barely know and may never see again.

On March 8, 2016, I arrived in Juba with minimum knowledge of the region’s history beyond Fashoda and Dafur—that is, knowing nothing at all. It was three years after the beginning of

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the civil war and in the middle of tenuous peace agreements.²²³ Colleagues at the Indiana University (IU) School of Education had invited me to join them to develop a Master’s Degree in Teaching Emergencies. This collaboration between IU, the University of Juba, and USAID existed long before I joined the team. Even if I had studied South Sudan for years, nothing and no one could have prepared me for my twenty-one days in Juba.

I arrived with a camera knowing that you are forbidden from taking photos in public places.²²⁴ It was only fitting that when I disembarked the situation that greeted me would become the one I wanted most to capture visually: United Nations (UN) peacekeepers searching for shade under anything they could find, stooping on the ground, and using their backpacks to shield from the sun. These grown men looked frightened and confused. They were children lost and maybe already regretting their tour of duty. The few who were lucky enough to find shade under the one or two existing trees sat, faces forward, looking at no one, fighting to not smell the stench carried from the bathroom to the arrival door.

Since I knew before leaving the United States that I would never take that picture or others, I carried a small notebook; one small enough to hide in my purse, with pages that could be easily removed and hidden if I had to run or be evacuated. I did not know what I would do with my notes when I returned home. But one day, after watching a UN High Commission meeting on South Sudan, I became angry as each representative began their address with how much money their country had given to rebuild Africa’s newest country. Someone may have mentioned human rights. Harvey argues that “…the freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is…one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.”²²⁵ Perhaps. But a city must provide access to and protection of

²²³ In March 2016, we paid close attention to whether or not opposition forces, with the full regiment of tanks and soldiers, would be allowed back into Juba.
²²⁴ We could also not take photos at the compound where we stayed.
²²⁵ Harvey, “The Right to the City,” 2.
the human rights that ensure that citizens have a city to which they have rights. Juba could do none of this. Its citizens were like the UN peacekeepers: exposed, frightened, alone, and reliant on their own power to be a collective.

As I watched the commission, I began crying. It was in this moment that I finally understood how Juba had “marked” me down to my bones. As a healer, I was accustomed to feeling what others could not. I was also accustomed to working with people and places healing from the past. This was different. War was imminent. History was being made and (re)lived in front of the world. In addition, I missed the people I had met, and was aware of the dangers and struggles they faced. In the aftermath of war, students had given me love and extended kinship. I had heard their harrowing stories of survival, but I had also witnessed their commitment to peace and transformation. I thought of the student who had addressed an email to me: “Dear Mother, I am very greatful [sic] to meeting you.” As I would write in a poem for this student:

Daughter. The word does not come easily.
If I write, Dear Daughter, what will happen?
Over 7,000 miles separate us. I cannot protect you
from guns and soldiers or your own fear.

Daughter, I am afraid of this word even when I think it.
I dare not whisper it to myself lest I am reminded
I cannot hold you in my arms if you are hurt. If you die,
part of me will die with you and my wailing will crack the sky.

Juba did the one thing to me that rarely happens: it made me afraid. And, for the first time in my life, I did not see viable options. It became apparent after watching the commission that neither did anyone else.

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226 When one of my readers used this term, I knew it was the right word: the experience of being in Juba had scared me in a way other trips had not. From a spiritual perspective, I understood Juba as an initiation to the continent and to aspects of my work that had laid dormant. Juba cut into me to reveal what I had hidden.

That day, I cried for over thirty minutes and had to call an elder to calm me.\textsuperscript{228} If my reaction was an indication of what would happen at the mention of Juba, then I had to find a way to articulate my anger and fear without falling apart. The only way I knew to do this was with poetry: I return to poetry to see details clearly, to feel what I do not want to feel, and to tell the truth in words I would never use otherwise. Poetry is the way I mourn and heal. The poems in this essay tell a story and reveal how I use poetry as a rite and ritual of mourning to re-make what Juba unmade. Like stories and ritual, you will have to engage them, step away, and listen to what wants to emerge for you. I cannot tell you what to see or feel. I can tell you what happened, but even that is only what I am able to process at this moment.

“Security Briefing,” “On World Water Day,” “Memory: Juba Four Years After Leaving,” and “How to Make and Keep a Place” are from *Learning to Eat the Dead, Juba, U.S.A.*,\textsuperscript{229} a manuscript I began out of my inability to unsee and unhear pain; my refusal and resistance to unfeel everything I experienced in my first and second—and final—trip to Juba. They began as daily electronic letters to family and friends to assure them that I was alive between March 8–16 and June 4–15, 2016, the weeks I worked on the project.

To reflect on how a thing changes us, we must at least have an idea of what the thing is, in this case the city of Juba. I begin with “Security Briefing.” Our secure compound was a city within itself, occupied by international peacekeepers, missionaries, NGOs, and educators. Like Juba, it was heavily guarded and adhered to the 9 p.m. curfew. Unlike Juba, it had resources: running water and working sanitation systems. Most fascinating, however, were the independent security

\textsuperscript{228} My unending gratitude to Iya Osunkoya Naheemah Jackson who took my call in the middle of the morning at work. I was shaking so badly I could barely speak.

\textsuperscript{229} Maria Hamilton Abegunde, *Learning to Eat the Dead: Juba, U.S.A.* You may find other excerpts from the manuscript published in COGzine (Issue 6), Tupelo Quarterly (November 14, 2018), and the Massachusetts Review (60\textsuperscript{th} anniversary issue).
forces contracted to protect and, in the event of political turmoil, extract visiting groups. If I had had any doubts about the danger I was in, this meeting dispelled them.

Security Briefing

I have arrived late, and, then, only because someone walked to my little house to make sure I had not fallen asleep.
What was I doing, you ask?
Choosing the right shoes to walk to the river for the evening.
Spraying my body with repellant.
Even at 6 pm I had to be careful of mosquito bites.
Planning the next day’s class lesson.
Breathing the air in Africa.

Everyone at the bar knows why we are here.
They’ve been through this before.
For some, this is their second tour of duty.
For others, this is their tenth.
For me? Well, there’s a first time for everything.
We sit on the high stools around the high tables,
like children unsure of what to expect
of our new teacher, our savior if things go bad.

What we are told
Travel with passports all the time.
Keep throw-away cash in your bras or socks.230
Don’t open car windows for anyone.
Don’t get out of car until destination.
Don’t violate the 9 p.m. curfew.
Do inform us of your whereabouts.

What I think
I am sitting in a bar
in a secure facility
on my first visit to The Continent
I have no place to hide
the bed is too low to crawl under
the wardrobe has shelves I cannot remove
the bushes in front of the house are small
I cannot run fast
I am a woman

230 The cash was to pay off police or military in case our driver was ever stopped on the street. It could be removed quickly from your bra and socks without having to open a bag to reveal other items. In addition, students shared that they slept with money in their beds for the same reason: if (and when) robbers entered your house to steal, giving them money immediately could save your life.
I am Black
I am an American
I am talking to the John McClane of South Africa
he is built like The Terminator
and the compound dog loves him

What I Feel
Absolutely nothing. Yet.

When I wrote this, I could not help thinking of how different the man who sat in front of me was from the young men I had seen at the airport. Later, after my friends and colleagues were evacuated in July 2016, I would learn that he had kept the promise he made to us that day: in case of emergency, he would drive around the city, throw us in his truck, and drive us to the airport, or Kenya if that was the only way out. But, I could not get the UN peacekeepers out of my head, especially after witnessing one of them clutch his steering wheel so tightly that I thought his fingers would break. If I was here to teach, they were here to protect. For the ones who were in Juba for the first time like I was, did they know what that meant? Did they know how to enter a city and care for its inhabitants? Did they know how to not act out of fear?

“How to Make and Keep a Place” is a letter to sons of nations on how to enter another people’s city without arrogance. As I wrote it, I thought about what I would tell myself the first time I visited a place whose culture was different than my own. I wanted them to know that Juba was more than the sum of its wars and was populated by people who knew things that could help them. For me, it was also a reminder to take nothing for granted.

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231 Tracie D. Hall, of the Joyce Foundation, commissioned this poem to be performed for the inaugural Artist as Problem Solver Workshop in 2018.
How to Make and Keep a Place

First and foremost:
Ask how to honor the dead.
Say thank you to everyone you meet
and to every place you go.

When the people invite you to see their city,
do not expect trees to shelter you from the heat.
You will not need to ask this kindness
if you water their roots and branches
with whatever water you have left.
Or if you have carried this water in buckets
balanced on your head,
like the women who pilgrimage daily to the river,
the source of their living.

Let the bottoms of your feet touch the burning ground,
Let the dirt settle between your toes.
Seek out the oldest man and woman you can find.
Wait for them to show you what they have created.
Wait for them to show you the past.
Wait for as long as it takes them
to acknowledge your existence.
Don’t anger when they laugh because your asking
has no rhythm or sense.

When it is time to eat, you will be disappointed.
There is no table, only mats on ground,
and large plates for everyone to share.
Take only what you can hold between
thumb and first two fingers.
Put the food (not your fingers)
into your mouth.
Wait until everyone has done this once
before taking more.

If still hungry, play with the children:
They will offer you their favorite
foods all sweet and salty and strange.
Eat until you are full but leave a small bit
for someone you will meet
along the road towards your next destination.

At the end of the day, when you have heard
all the people’s stories,
seen all they have made,
re-lived all they have remembered,
wait, sit, be silent:
the people will sing to you
their true names and the names
they have for things you think you recognize,
and you will want to correct them
or question the words they use
to call the earth plenty or community family
or sunflowers hope.
Don’t be rude.
Repeat what the people tell you, until
you, too, can speak their language
with only slightly incorrect inflections.

Remember: arrive naked
like the day you were born:
knowing nothing
trusting everyone (at first)
and hungry for everything
you don’t even know
you need to stay alive.

I wanted the peacekeepers to stay alive because I wanted to stay alive. And as I rode back and forth to the university, I saw signs that said the South Sudanese wanted peace. One day after teaching, I said to a student that this was my first time to Africa and that South Sudan was my point of entry. She said: A bad point of entry. To her disbelief, I disagreed. I explained: It is a good point of entry for me and the work I do in the world. I know that all of Africa is not like this, and that there would be peace in Juba again.

As the earlier poem “Security Briefing” illustrates, for safety reasons someone always drove us to and from the university. Hence, I was not allowed to see or interact with the city except on rare occasions: out of my desperation for chocolate, cheese, and a small bucket to wash my panties232 the driver took me to a “global market,” and at the invitation of a resident who was connected to the universities he took the team to that person’s home for dinner. The trip to the grocery store was a privilege that I did not ask for again until my second visit to Juba. At the checkout,

232 While there was a mandatory laundry service, the women did not wash women’s panties for cultural and, perhaps, religious reasons.

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I understood why the women had been watching me so closely: the half-pound cheddar cheese that none of them could buy. Before paying for my items, I returned the cheese for a piece more reasonably priced than the more than twenty US dollars it would have cost me. The women reminded me of what I knew: a city is nothing without its people, especially Black women who would simultaneously chide you for and be in awe of your luxurious tastes.

If I define the city of Juba as the people I met and who cared for me, then yes, the city altered my life. It was the people who entered my soul the moment I landed. Upon my arrival, my passport identified me as the one Black non-African woman in the airport. The other women watched me with curiosity: my head was covered but I was not Muslim. The men, on the other hand, treated me like a queen and, I joke, had calculated how many cattle I was worth based on my age, girth, weight, and education before I retrieved my suitcases. More than one of them assisted me through the customs line, showing me where I should sign forms I did not understand. At the university, students trusted me enough to invite me to pray with them the morning I found them saying the Rosary; on my last day in June, they prayed over me; they danced with me and imitated my dancing and joked at how free I was in my body. They accepted my gifts of incense and small cloth pouches. In return, they shared their stories with me and asked that I carry them home.

Harvey writes that we cannot separate “the city” from who we are and wish to be. Juba made me ask who do I—individually and collectively—wish to be? What type of people do I want in the places where I live? How do I want to be in community with them? Juba made me answer these questions by learning why we kill the people we love and then ”eat” them; that is why and how we feed on the death and suffering of other people. Juba made me want even more to live in a world

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233 My passport was visible, but compared to others who spoke English, my speech was unaccented.
234 Harvey, David. “The Right to the City.”
where after I leave a city its history does not haunt me; its trauma does not unearth my own.\textsuperscript{235} This desire arose most when I saw children: they were soldiers riding in the backs of trucks and the homeless living in the cemeteries.\textsuperscript{236} No one could protect them and, in some cases, no one would be able to protect me from them.

“Memory: Juba Four Years after Leaving” is one of several poems in the manuscript that focus on my encounters with children on the street. These were the hardest since we were prohibited from opening our windows to respond to their petitions. This was, of course, for our safety. We could not ascertain from looking at a child if they were working alone or in a group. An opened window could be an invitation for an ambush. Still, this did not stop my feeling helpless as we moved through the city. When I returned to the United States and started reviewing my notebook, I found an entry about a little boy who one morning walked up to the car, placed his hands on the window, and looked directly at me as he removed one hand, cupped his fingers as if he were picking up food, and brought them to his mouth. It was one of the few times someone “outside” made such contact. It would not be the last time I had to force myself to look through another human being to take care of myself. Like the image that shaped my entry into Juba, this image would shape my first exit from the city.

\textsuperscript{235} To prepare for Juba, I had to consider the worst things that could happen to me, especially being raped. This meant reflecting on (and sometimes reliving) the sexual violence that I had experienced as a child and adult. In August 2016, two months after I left Juba, humanitarian workers were gang raped not far from where we had been staying.

\textsuperscript{236} When in Juba, I noticed that because of the number of internally displaced persons that people set up shelter in the cemeteries.
I have asked this question before: What do I, can I, do? The first time I became aware of Sudan was in 2006 after Newsweek’s December 25, 2006–January 1, 2007 “Periscope,” from which I keep a torn-out page taped to a bookcase in my study so I can see it (or consciously avoid it): a grandmother holding a child. It still renders me silent. Then and now, I think: how can love sustain us during suffering?

On my second visit to Juba, it seemed like the child who touched the window was everywhere: the number of children on the street had increased, but so had the number of soldiers and armed vehicles. The city was full with internally displaced people seeking refuge under leafless trees. I would be in Juba for a longer time and knew after the first day I would not hold it together if this was all I saw. So, I chose to see the toddler in a purple dress running down the hallway as if all her life she will be in a playground, and the young couple leaning against each other, holding hands, talking and smiling as the sun set. It was during this trip that students told me all they had sacrificed to survive. And, it was this trip that reconfirmed for me that Black people all over the world know how to live. Students would remind me of this the day after the Pulse nightclub massacre when we
discussed the difference between political violence, genocide, and massacres. I heard a student ask, as if they were asking for the time of day: How many people did they kill from your village?

They each had an answer. I, on the other hand, could not tell them how and why the Pulse killing was possible—or the killings of Philando Castile, Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin. In addition to being rite and ritual, the poems are how I search for answers. They allow me to remember the man strutting down the street in a yellow shirt and red pants as if 6-feet-5-inch tar-colored men everywhere could pull that off, or Abraham, a former child soldier, dancing to Salif Keita, down a make-shift Soul Train line. These memories balance the ones of a student hiding under dead bodies, or watching their family bombed, or knowing their sister will be captured and raped in a tunnel because she is too big to fit through the hole that they can. They are how bit-by-bit I do not succumb to the image the world has of Juba as a city of chaos and death.

To understand how a place has unmade you, you must know how other cities have done the same, or how they have helped you remake yourself. I travel as a Black Caribbean American woman. I am a different person in Bahia, Chicago, New York, and Bloomington: the histories and politics of those cities, and my knowledge of them, shape how others perceive me, my freedom to move through them, how I walk their streets, and my ability to make meaning of it all in my own life. In Salvador, Bahia, for example, the city reminds me that I am Black and a descendant of Africans who resisted enslavement; that samba is in my step; and the ocean invites me to accept her healing. Juba revealed to me the multiple futures of the world, and I did not like what I saw. My sobbing is my total rejection of them: I push out what the world wants to violently impose on me. I, therefore, cannot treat any city as external to my life and, for matters of safety and pleasure, must recognize how I have internalized a city’s breath and heartbeat.

I am not a citizen of Juba or South Sudan. I have no rights in or to them. Yet, they have taken a right to me. If I told you how many hours and days I have cried (still cry), perhaps you might roll
your eyes and wonder at my privilege to do so. I am, after all, safe. I don’t have the experience of my colleagues or the life of the students. Yet, part of me remained in Juba. I am working hard to reclaim her. Reclamation is hard work that requires re-membering and re-integration; it requires an acknowledgment that I will never be the same and that I must re-vision myself and the world around me.

Juba tells me: nothing is permanent and all things are possible. I was reminded of this on the last day of class when a student arrived late. What she shared: The night before, a man went through her neighborhood knocking on doors. Everyone who opened the door was shot to death. Her father refused to open theirs “for anyone who did not already have a key.”237 Despite this, she did not want to miss class. She traveled the long distance by bus to give testimony and thanks for having survived the night.

Finally, as much as we watch the city and its inhabitants, they watch us. This was made clear to me in a conversation with Noah, one of our compound’s staff, who had been given the assignment of coming to learn more about me. In doing so, Noah confirmed that in the short time I had been in Juba that my life was intricately linked to its people, who welcomed me in the best way they knew how: Asking me who I was. An excerpt from my conversation with Noah is below:

Noah: Yes, we have been talking about you. We see a lot of people here all year long. Hundreds of people come and go. But, we watch you and say, this woman is different. She is not like the others who come here.
Me: Different. Explain that to me.
Noah: You act like a rich person.
Me: A rich person? What does that mean? Is that good or bad (me thinking about socio-economic disparities, colonialism, perspectives on Americans, African Americans seen as white people in some parts of the world, privilege, overdressing)?
Noah: You move so calmly. Like you have nowhere to go. Taking your time. And the way you dress. We see you dress like you come from a nice family.
Me: That is something my husband’s people would say. Who are your people?
Noah: The Bari people. And you?
Me: Born in the US and –
Noah: US?

237 Direct quote from student.
Me: Yes. US and brought up in the Caribbean.
Noah: US? You see, we said you are different.
Me: Do you have children? How are they? Your wife?238
Noah: Yes. I have three. My wife, she is well, too. Do you have children? My people say that a good tree will make two drums. Once you make the first and you see how good it is you want to make another.
Me: No children. Thank you, Noah for taking the time to talk to me. There are few things that are so important that I can’t stop and say hello or help.
Noah: You see. We said you were different. Well. I know you must go and I must go.
Me: Thank you, Noah. It was good to speak with you. I hope to speak to you again.
Noah: Yes. We look forward to this.

I do, too. But the truth is, I don’t know if I will ever return to Juba. It saddens me to write this because I see the great work the students are doing and have not figured out how I can help.

What happens when the city you visit is not one you ever desired; has no structures to provide human rights to its citizens, or to protect them? Or when you visit a city that has such a strong presence in the world that you are changed without any attempt of your own? What happens when you return home and you cannot externalize or excise the city and the relationships you have created with the people who have also been un/made by it?

You cry for days and weeks. When you meet peacekeepers, after you say hello, you ask: So, what are we going to do about Juba? You learn everything you can about Juba and South Sudan. At parties for exchange students, you seek out the South Sudanese to ask about their families. You don’t sleep at night. You remember your childhood traumas. You write poetry. You pray. You remember as water flows effortlessly into your glass: make good with everything you have ever been given.

238 In June, I would learn to not ask this question unless invited to after meeting Mary who greeted me by saying: I have heard so much about you. We have been waiting for your return. When I asked her how her family was, she said without stopping to help me move in: oh, they are all dead.
On World Water Day

Sip cool water.
How easy you walk
to sink, turn on
faucet

clear liquid fills
your glass
does not
smell of oil
taste of chlorine
burn like acid

meditate on sound
a river makes over rocks
a river meeting other rivers
the rivers joining the ocean
where life began

(The children are waiting.
Their mother’s wombs are dry.
The children dream
The time
They choose
to live again
They will no longer be thirsty.
They pray the oil in Juba
Will turn into water.
The water turned into rice.
The rice turned into potatoes.
The potatoes turned into bread.
And that fish appear in baskets
On top their mothers’ heads.
They say once,
We agreed
Never again.
Yet, here we are.)

listen
to stream whisper
until your glass is full
into silence
Bibliography:


III. PROSE
Mississippi Goddam
Celeste Williams

....Problems as deep-rooted as 100-year-old trees that jut up on the flat horizon. I won’t be the same after I have seen this place. … This place is burned permanently in my mind.

Dear Mississippi:

I wrote that more than 30 years ago, when I was a news reporter, sent with another reporter and photographer to live for the better part of three months in Tunica, then the poorest place in the continental U.S.

I’m thinking of you now, you fertile, poor, problematic, indelible state. I am thinking you now, in this time of reckoning. In the context of, well, everything.

Back then, Jesse Jackson toured a neighborhood called “Sugar Ditch,” a row of shacks existing alongside an open sewer, and declared it “America’s Ethiopia” — meaning that it shamefully reminded him of an African country which at the time was experiencing the ravages of famine and extreme deprivation.

The mighty Mississippi River, for which you are named, ran its course to the Gulf of Mexico just over giant levees. On exploring hikes, I found graves marked with flat, crooked stones, scratched with unintelligible names just down the road from manicured, fenced cemeteries of dead white people. There was a diner where no Black resident ever ate, though they worked in the kitchen. It wasn’t that there was a “Whites only” sign; folks just knew.

You had, and still have a way about you, Mississippi. You rate continually at the top of “worst” lists; at the bottom of lists of “best.”

I have seen your past, Mississippi; I see you now.

And in this year, 2020, a year of cascading upheaval, I gaze upon you, my mouth agape in amazement. For you decided to delete your state flag — the one with the Confederate battle emblem in the upper left corner — a red field topped by a blue X with thirteen white stars.

Those stars represented the group that left the Union. Because you and the others wanted to keep owning people who worked for free.

Black people.

You came to my mind during a storm, a storm where seemingly unrelated events converged like air currents in the jet stream. A worldwide biological contagion collided with a racist murder gone viral, and was followed by a mass awakening like no other, marked by protestors of all colors proclaiming with fists raised, “Black Lives Matter!”

You, Mississippi, were in the midst of this global recalculation of meaning; this reckoning.
As you might ask in your Southern drawl, *You reckon?*

Yes. You lost the war. The Union was saved. Slavery abolished (kind of).

(I am going to digress for a moment here, because of the parenthetical “kind of” above. I have a friend, a reporter with whom I worked in Memphis. She recently discovered a 1940 Census record of her father, who sharecropped on a Mississippi plantation. These lines caught her eye: *Hours Worked Week Prior to Census: 48; Class of Worker: Working on own account; Weeks Worked in 1939: 52; Income: 0.* Read that again. INCOME: ZERO.)

Your white supremacist legislators in 1894 put the losing war emblem on the upper-left corner of the Mississippi flag.

Your “heritage” argument, excuse me, is bullshit. You put it there to let African Americans know who was still in charge of their lives — that no, no, Black lives did *not* matter.

And you rained down terror to cement the point. You pretty much retained slavery (see above), allowed vigilantes, some dressed in sheets, to terrorize and murder innocents, you re-enslaved others through imprisonment and murdered those who dared to even whisper a desire to vote.

I hear you need a new flag.

Your new flag should take into account all of those martyrs and heroes, including my friend’s father who worked for nothing, and nameless dozens, more likely thousands, who died on your soil, and those whose names are scratched on those gravestones and those permanently etched in your history — though you have tried to erase them.

I’m thinking of Emmett Till, Goodman, Schwerner and Cheney, Medgar Evers. Those are the ones you might remember. How about those you have tried to forget? The Southern Poverty Law Center names many of them, including Rev. George Lee, who was murdered attempting to register voters; Mack Charles Parker, an innocent accused of raping a white woman; Cpl. Roman Duckworth, a military police officer on leave who was mistaken for a “Freedom Rider;” Johnnie Mae Chappell, murdered by whites who were looking for a random Black person to shoot; Wharlest Jackson, promoted to a job previously reserved for whites, blown up when a bomb exploded in his car, because he apparently forgot — that he lived in Mississippi.

I recall Tunica’s public high school — an old, brick structure that needed many repairs, out and in. That’s where all the Black kids went. And I recall Tunica Institute of Learning, a gleaming building near the edge of town where all the white kids went. It was the private school.

The superintendent of the 98-percent-Black public school was white; he sent his children to the 100-percent-white private school. The schools had separate homecoming parades and proms. He told me it wasn’t polite to question the obvious.

He told me this in an interview, during which he rudely put his stockinged feet up on his desk. “Segregation was a matter of custom,” he said before launching a dark line of masticated tobacco into a spittoon.

Still, the Black people in this seemingly God-forsaken place had hope. I remember that, too.

I remember Emma Carter, the youngest of Minnie Carter’s ten children, graduating from that segregated high school. Mrs. Carter did not finish school, but made sure all of her children did. She was afraid that she would say something wrong when I spoke to her.

But her words were poetry:
“It’s joyful to be in the land of the living to see your baby grow up. I just can’t explain it. You just feel like, like a burning lighting up on you, like you got a new religion, know what I mean? And with the baby coming out, it’s just like it’s all coming together.”

After I left, Tunica had a strange transformation. In the early 1990s, Sugar Ditch was bulldozed, and its racist reputation was attempted to be turned under like a tilled field by planting casinos and golf courses. And history was sanitized to the point where a researcher would have to dig deep to even find the week-long series of stories I and my colleagues wrote about the place.

More than a quarter of Tunica’s residents remain poor. The casinos are going bust; population is plummeting. Some new housing for the poor was built, but many still live in shacks that are a stark window to your ugly past, Mississippi.

But your flag. Gone. After several failed attempts to get rid of that banner, this time, because of The Reckoning, its scrapping succeeded in record fashion.

Congratulations, Mississippi. To paraphrase Nina Simone at the end of her song (ending with no punctuation):

“...Everybody knows about Mississippi goddam, that’s it”

So, what now, Mississippi?

What now, America?

Goddam.

Sincerely,

Celeste
IV. POETRY
Outside Myself, Within Myself

Tatjana Rebelle

I am continually an outsider in my own world.
All the pieces of myself fighting for attention.
Every aspect of my being grasping for acceptance.
Constantly struggling outside myself, within myself, to be seen as a whole.
Every news article of oppression linked to some integral part of my soul.
Because I am a bisexual, biracial, binational woman.

My sexuality now on everyone’s tongues because the genitalia of my former partner didn’t match their norms and no one gives a shit about the word bi when you’re dating another sex.

My family disowning me for being in love.

My own government trying to criminalize my then partner because their presumed identity didn’t match their assigned gender.

Wanting nothing more than to have kissed them on the streets without wondering who would want to hurt us.

Wanting nothing more than to find a place we could have gotten married without the fear of being denied a space because someone’s “God” condemns us.

Being faced with the notion of GOD, questioning her existence simply because of someone else’s hatred.

Constantly struggling outside myself, within myself, to be seen as a whole.

biracial… binational… bisexual

My father’s only trace is within my skin.

The skin that links me to a history entrenched with pain, prejudice and survival.

My mother’s white skin and German accent the link to the only family I’ve known and too was carried across an ocean.

Wanting nothing more than to just be myself but I’m constantly reminded that I am too Black for some and too white for others.
Wanting to be accepted as mixed but fully aware, I live in a place that doesn’t give a shit about bloodline.
Finally, facing the notion that the only thing that matters is what they can categorizes you as.

Finally, coming face to face with the notion that in the past I’d be that house nigga accepted by no one… feeling like the modern day equivalent when I step into my job.

Constantly struggling outside myself, within myself to be seen as a whole.

binational… bisexual… biracial

My soul is yearning for a connection with my elders but I am separated by language on one side and the misdeeds of my father on the other.

My history speaks of slaves on plantations killed by separatists and soilders killed by Nazi’s during the war.

Wanting to feel accepted as an American but being first generation means, the walls of my childhood were held together by German values.

Wanting to find my place amongst my ancestors but fear my story will get lost amongst the tales of mixed breeds untold by both sides.

Finally, coming face to face with the fact I’m a litmus test for everyone’s racists ideologies, because rarely has anyone opened themselves up to realizing Black people can actually be born in Germany.

Constantly struggling outside myself, within myself, to be seen as a whole.

bisexual… biracial… binational

Then breathing and taking a step back to acknowledge my struggles and my differences. Realizing that no one feels accepted.

Everyone is looking for connection.

Accepting that these are all the pieces that make my story my own.

The things that I thought seperated me- unites me to everyone.


Yesterday, I dropped off my little girl.
A favor to her Mama who went upstate for the day.
Her hand in mine walking to school
like it should always be.
The handle on the entrance door resists entry.
Locked out?
Isn’t this a public place?
Don’t I pay my taxes?
Don’t I pay for this school?
I try to force the door open.
I need to get in.
I don’t want my daughter to be late.
[A sudden picture of my brother’s hands
gripping steel bars, trying to bend them.
Shaking them hard.
Locked in.
He needs to get out.
And me, telling him that four more years isn’t so bad.]

And then...
“Papa. You gotta speak in that little microphone.”
I say, “For what?”
Her little six-year-old feet on tippy-toes,
she presses a button, says, “hello.”
Three cameras overhead, one centers on me.
With a click, the door unlocks.
Will life always be that easy for her?
My baby pushes it open, with authority –
like her Mama would do.
Her Mama humming and smiling,
pretending that she belongs,
signing our baby in,
saying hello to the white ladies behind the desk
who’d be smiling back.
I get a long look instead.
I know what’s coming.
“Sir, can you show some identification?”
Reaching for my wallet I catch
a sudden inhale,
the white lady’s breath quickening,
her steely eyes blinking...
In a millisecond everything can go wrong.
I slowly extend my arm toward her.
Seeing my i.d. in hand
she exhales relief too loudly, then fakes a quick cough.
*Like I was gonna pull out a weapon instead?*
I say nothing,
I've learned to say nothing,
and sign my baby in.

If I knew what was mine,
I'd take my baby to school everyday.
I'd walk those sidewalks head high,
shoulders back, steps brazen,
tattoos earned on tour, glistening.
I'd push through those doors,
no i.d. needed, just my smile.
I'd stand in the office
seen, heard.
Respected.
‘Cause my words matter. My life matters.
And those ladies would know that. Feel that.
They wouldn’t blink in fear.
They’d look forward to seeing me,
waiting to hear my next joke.
Because I used to be funny,
back in the day when I knew what was mine.

If I knew what was mine,
I wouldn’t live by myself
in that shithole where I lay my head.
I wouldn’t lie low,
I’d ignore the glares,
the constant insults,
the poor paying work.
I’d forget all the lies, like my favorite:
“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal…”

*Equal in what way?*
A brown man living in the United States.
Dark skin, black hair, a hint of accent.
*Equal for who? Equal where?*
My body,
an object to be ridiculed, harassed, militarized, beaten, worn,
rejected in public spaces,
told to go home, even though I fought for this country.
*What home? What land? I don’t have either anymore.*

If I knew what was mine,
I’d head home, to a place where I belong.
I’d take off my mask and cry my true self,
because I would know,
like the lines of my palms
that my baby girl and her Mama were waiting
for me to return,
for me to stand tall,
for me claim what is mine.
This April, a freak accident,  
a careless pirouette  
at just the perfect angle into a doorway  
and my middle toe bent ninety degrees  
and fractured.  
And we were ready to build the garden beds  
this second year. The five-year-old  
had thrown dirt into seedling trays ’til he got bored.  
The treated lumber was ordered,  
seven tons of new topsoil mounded  
at the end of the driveway.  
Sarah, who weighs a hundred pounds when wet,  
would not be deterred. She dragged the treated  
ten-foot two-by-eights and two-by-twelves  
down the hill and set up work lights. In the dark,  
the sound of power tools, stripping screws, and curses,  
and not a little blood and splinters later the beds were squared—  
three in single file behind the chicken coop,  
ambling down the hill  
where the five-year-old sledded that winter.  
Then the neighbors across the street brought shovels,  
their wheelbarrow, and their boys to help. As soon  
as I could limp (I’d cut the top off one sneaker) I joined the crew.  
We paid them in fresh eggs, a new, better wheel, and new shovel when  
theirs broke. It’s good, and surprising, to have such neighbors.  
It took weeks of spare time, 15 to 20 shovels per barrow,  
40-50 barrow loads a bed,  
until one day when I could walk, more or less,  
I surprised her by dumping the last loads while she worked.  
Then, conditioning the soil.  
Then seeds and seedlings.  
Then mentally begging the empty beds to yield.  
We were new at this—garden beds  
and neighbors, green  
and determined as the seedlings  
that broke the dirt too tender to survive,  
but soon turned sturdy. I think we are a puzzle  
to those who thought they knew us. But there is this  
desire to cast off the hard casing,  
to feed on this new ground.
And then there are those projects
like the hoop house. I followed the plans
but it blew over, so I built it again,
improvising, like I have with my life.

The thing with improvising is you
get to the good spot, but you have more
impulses so you keep going until you’ve
gone too far. I call it, “sending one too many
e-mails.” So I’m afraid adding these new
bits to the hoop house, now that I’ve made
it nice and sturdy, will ruin it.

I work like this. You know that.
Even with the Vyvanse and Ritalin,
I can’t stop the ideas from bursting forth,
expanding like bubbles, then popping or rising
away or sinking…all those lost moments.
You never want to go past your potential
to do great things.

The hoop house is just a bubble
of poly plastic over a thin tubular shell
and the wind carries it off like one of
my dreams. But you are a dream we
improvised and it just keeps expanding
in place. You’re that one perfect solo
that never ends, sturdy diatonic frame
supporting the thinnest flights of fancy
a long melismatic feast
where sour notes don’t break the shell
that glistens and persists in all weather.
As you know,
my A.D.D. mind works in
fragments a name here and there
maybe later connecting with
a face, a place, a time

people fade in and out
like they do in dreams,
bits of lives lived a casino
full of noisy lights and bells
and fortunes constantly
changing, memories
splinters of roads
meeting at angles

the mosaic of me
reassembling frequently
to some new or rediscovered
version of a self

i only hope i’m
more than a fragment
to you more than sharp
pieces of cracked glass