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## **Re-Visioning Insurgent Memories and Some Work Toward a Revolutionary Vision of the Public University**

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### **Abstract**

Within this chapter I write as an organizer, and participant in fifty years of publicly engaged teaching and scholarship projects. Here is memory of collaborative effort to realize the emancipatory potential of university environments too often hostile to socially just democracy. This piece is the story of how commitment to social justice, using the public spaces we are given to work in, can form “insurgent” resistance to legacies of unjust exclusion, racism, and bureaucratic elitism. For if not resisted, they distort, even destroy the moral outlines of democratic schooling. It is written for and with, new communities, teachers, professors, activists, and organizers in solidarity, and is just one trajectory with examples of how project collaborations worked to negotiate the bureaucratic terrain of public service in education, with all the ups and downs of such an effort. Here is an autoethnographic writing form as a method of *inquiry*, that is itself the method of personal and community discovery. It works also to honor student-scholars, and comrade professors and teachers, as we accompanied each other through the years in learning and action.

**Keywords:** *democratic schooling, social justice in education, public university,*

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## **Introduction**

*“ . . . the most admirable thinkers within the scholarly community . . . do not split their work from their lives. They seem to take both too seriously to allow such disassociation, and they want to use each for the enrichment of the other.”*

C. Wright Mills, 1959, p. 195.

*“No nation threatens us. We threaten the world.”*  
W.E.B. DuBois, 1968, p. 415.

I follow Mills’ advice from the opening quote, before I ever hear his name. It does not occur to me that my action is related to being a thinker within scholarly community; rather, follow the next step in front of me, steps that for many years are taken to survive a world for which I am ill prepared<sup>1</sup>. One of my professors, Huw Beynon, wrote the following in his 1973 book, *Working for Ford*, “C. Wright Mills started his book, *The Sociological Imagination*, with the words: ‘Nowadays most men feel their . . . lives are a series of traps.’ That was fifteen years ago. . . Little has happened, since Mills wrote his book, to suggest that the imagination of sociologists has helped matters. That these ‘scientific’ examiners of society have failed to make clear the issues that so deeply affect people’s lives, is a condemnation of them and their art. At best, they have written with ‘the profession’ over their right shoulder and produced sociology for sociologists: an absurdity which cuts the writer off from the subjects of his writing” (p. 9).

Nearly 50 years later, I work toward a revolutionary university that engages scholarship *with* people, not on or about people, scholarship *with and for* beloved community. We have much good work to do. So, I write this account for and with, new communities, teachers, professors, activists and organizers in solidarity. Solidarity also with revolutionary efforts of our foremothers and fathers, whose

inspiration shapes our work. This is work that seeks to shorten the length of the “long arc,” Dr. King proclaimed, “that bends toward justice.”

Written while remembering, this inquiry is a “re-visioning” that utilizes Henri Lefebvre’s concept heterotopia to explore “liminal social spaces of possibility where ‘something different’ is not only possible but foundational for the defining of revolutionary trajectories. I adopt an autoethnographic method that with Rolling (2006) “operates within the interstices—and blurs the boundaries—between individual reflexivity, the transcription of collective human experience, and writing as a form of inquiry that does not merely ‘write up’ the research but is itself the ‘method of discovery.’” After Donna Haraway (1997), I work here to write as a moral witness, excavating fifty years of work toward a future I didn’t know was using me<sup>ii</sup> and I must stand “publicly accountable for, and psychically vulnerable to” what is disclosed (p. 267).

Here a record of personal and intellectual influences on the choices I make and have made, to engage in community building, project development to help empower students over a fifty-year career. At the same time, it is a series of snapshots, brief pictures of the nuts and bolts, and the materials of key projects that shaped my life, and my lifetime community. I honor the student-scholars, and comrade professors and teachers who accompanied me in this lifework. Accompaniment and community are an essence of solidarity, and it is an honor to share this experience with new readers, new community.

Here I describe a blend of influences, those scholars and artists, colleagues, friends, students and family which have moved me toward my commitments, and that “imagination,” personal, real, and also intellectual which motivates a career in critical praxis, and the life I lived, and live today. It is a flight path, a trajectory that I am sure every reader can relate to and I hope it stimulates readers to explore their own memories and current commitments toward continued connections between their life transformations and developing commitments, and their critical work. This includes ALL the early confusion, mistakes, inconsistencies and honest

misunderstandings that are natural in every learning process. For those “failures” and especially the way we deal with them, become a part of the finished products of all successes.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, that 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher-avatar for critical intellectuals and activists who came after him, gives encouragement: “With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. . . He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today.—‘Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.’—Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood?” (p. 83-84).<sup>ii</sup>

"Re-visioning" echoes crucial themes of Adrienne Rich's (1972) essay *"When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision."*<sup>iii</sup> For Rich (1972), *re-vision* is "an act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (p. 18). Additional echoes of Rich include a shared concern with "awakening of dead or sleeping consciousness", toward concern for radically democratic education practices; a concern for listening authentically to learn newly from the past; and a concern with "how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language can trap and liberate us; and how we can begin to see--and therefore live—afresh" (p 18). And like Rich, I recognize my luck to have been born into circumstances that enable forms of privilege that are still denied to so many.

### **The Sixties: A Watershed Period of New Possibilities**

*Something's happening here, what it is ain't exactly clear . . . Everybody look  
what's going down.  
Steven Stills, 1966<sup>iv</sup>*

This excavation begins in the 1960s, an era Cornel West (1994) describes as “a watershed period in American history because for the first time we decided as a people to overcome the racial divide and declare war on poverty. Within two years,

legal barriers against black access to civil and voting rights were erased. Within eight years, half of America's poor were lifted out of poverty. And within a decade, the number of poor old people was more than cut in half. Contrary to the popular myths about the sixties, this was a moment in which we bravely confronted our most explosive issues as a people: racial hierarchy and the maldistribution of wealth and power" (p. 157).

In 1968, a first-generation college student, eldest of ten children, reared in a Mormon, military family, I drop out of college, get married, and accept a job as the secretary for an Upward Bound Program<sup>v</sup> at Southern Utah State College (SUSC). This program partners with 10 high schools and a student population of low-income students (Navajo, Hopi, Latinx and White) and introduces me to the idea of education as transformational, to publicly engaged scholarship<sup>vi</sup> enacted through university-school partnerships, and to my first friendships with indigenous people that will last my lifetime. Following this work and an introduction to feminist theory, I complete my membership in the Mormon church, unable to reconcile racist and sexist practices I witness. Determined to erase the Mormonism from me, I discover it's not so simple: recall a poster hanging in a Mormon church with Shakespeare's words, "To thine own self be true".

My father reinforces this message. Not a Mormon, he preaches that choice of spiritual belief does not matter, what matters is to not be a hypocrite. He dreamed of receiving a college degree and spent 20 years as a sergeant in the Air Force because he lacked one. He wants that degree for me. His death from a heart attack at 46 makes me eligible for the GI Bill<sup>vii</sup> and I enroll at a community college, determined to use this gift to realize what is now our dream. I plan to become a social studies teacher but witnessing the same inquiry-deadening pedagogical practices in the local high school that cooled out my intellectual curiosity, I change my major to diversified social sciences. The absence of critical social foundations courses in that teacher education program leave me ill equipped to become the innovative educator I aspire to be, the educator I eventually become.

### **Transforming Personal Troubles into Public Issues**

*“Each time I have attempted to do theoretical work it has been on the basis of elements from my experience . . . It is in fact because I thought I recognized something cracked, dully jarring or dysfunctioning in the things I saw, in the institutions with which I dealt, in my relations with others, that I undertook a particular piece of work, several fragments of an autobiography”*

Michel Foucault (quoted in Rajchman, 1988)

I take a senior seminar with a sociologist from England, Huw Beynon. Proudly owning his working-class roots, he shares his recent publicly engaged scholarship that illuminates the exploitation of workers on the Ford assembly line, their economic and political aspirations, and the nature of trade union workplace organization.

Huw does not separate his life from his work.<sup>viii</sup> Passion inspires his scholarship, his exploration of the nexus of biography and society, his commitment to a better world. His seminar continues long into the night at the local bar. Through his moral witnessing, testimony and civic courage, a group of us become disciples. He activates our hunger for a scholar-activist stance we had not known possible.

Simultaneously, I take a graduate course on deviance with a professor who instructs that we may only refer to him as Dr. until we have a PhD. He embraces Marxism but from a distanced, strictly theoretical, third-person perspective. We barely speak until the course ends and he reads my final paper: a Marxist/Feminist analysis of rape. He invites me to consider graduate school and working as his teaching assistant. I agree, complete a master’s degree in deviance and criminology, the only way I can explore feminist studies in this department. The following questions emerge: What is just? Who is oppressed? Is a world that works for all possible?

### **Returning to Praxis: Witnessing the Erasure of Insurgent Memory**

The year is 1978. Restless for praxis, I accept the directorship of the SUSC Upward Bound Program.

*We are family/ get up everybody and sing/.../I won't tell no lie/all the people around us they say/ can they be that close?/ Just let me state for the record/ we're giving love in a family dose/ ...Sister Sledge, 1979<sup>ix</sup>*

During the next four years we implement an Upward Bound Program that seeks to foster what John Dewey (1930) termed the “moral meaning of democracy”: the all-around growth of each participant. We undertake the incredibly complex challenge that Robert Allen Warrior (1995) names a “death dance of dependence between, on the one hand, abandoning ourselves to the intellectual strategies and categories of white European thought and, on the other hand, declaring we need nothing outside of ourselves and our culture in order to understand the world and our place in it” (pp. 123-124) while singing “We are family!”

A colleague, Clarence Shelley, visits the residential summer program during my final year and jokes, “Are these students on drugs? They are happy and seem to love being here!” Hearing his comment I discover how a philosophy of education written prior to assuming this position has been guiding each decision about hiring staff members, the curriculum we create, the fieldtrips we take, and the way we structure student government to handle student discipline. In collaboration, we create a program where students are passionately connected to each other and to love learning.

I lead the implementation of projects to more effectively serve students: serve on a campus committee to revise curriculum to include contributions from women and people of color; secure funding for a Special Services Program that facilitates successful college matriculation with 200 first-generation college students; secure funding for a NSF Minority Apprenticeship Program that enables students to explore

career options in the sciences; lead the creation of the first developmental courses at this open admission college; and inaugurate a faculty newsletter, *Of Common Concern*, that focuses upon issues of developmental education and student retention.

Kee Yazzie, a former Upward Bound student, advises faculty:

[O]ne way to reach Indian students would be to involve Indian culture in lectures. The reasons are that most of these students come from a Hogan<sup>x</sup>(traditional, octagonal Dine' dwelling) with the closest neighbor about five miles away and a trading post about 20 miles away ... Examples dealing with urbanization and white culture are misunderstood or simply not clear. . . I have never seen the things that the class discussions are about, like the problem of noise, the problem of solid waste disposal . . . the problem of air pollution. I have nothing to identify the examples with to fully understand them. So, I simply overlook them and search for some other examples that I can understand. (White & Shelley, 1996, p. 30)

During this work, I awaken to the shuttering of insurgent memory as I witness the co-opting of Upward Bound, and other TRIO<sup>xi</sup> programs. As observed by Ben Snyder (1981), a former Upward Bound director, "The launching of Upward Bound into uncertain seas was left to an organization called Educational Associates, Inc., a group of feisty, rollicking, iconoclastic adventurers who felt . . . nothing was impossible with energy and commitment. They work to transform the status quo of educational institutions that deny genuine educational opportunity to all students. This energy and commitment is redirected and coopted with new directives from the federal government that programs focus upon quantitative evaluations of this work. We are given a mandate to delete the word "minority" or reference to race from our grant proposals, in effect erase any acknowledgement of the severe impediments of systemic and institutionalized racism and write only about the limitations of family income and inadequate academic preparation for post-secondary success. I discover my radical intentions for transforming institutional practices are not widely



shared among TRIO colleagues. Many adopt a stance of “fitting” students to the existing structures, by any means necessary; a stance that enables them to construct numerical representations of “success” for Washington, enables them to keep their funding, keep their jobs.

Attending a Project Director Program Evaluation Training Program in the early 1980s, is where I meet Clarence Shelley, Dean of Students at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana (UI). Shelley grows up in the Black Bottom section of Detroit, becomes a high school English teacher and then director of the UI Special Educational Opportunities Program in 1968 when Chancellor Jack Peltason decides to increase the number of African American students at UI by 500 for the 1968-69 academic year. Shelley is given four months to recruit students from the least-likely neighborhoods, like the south side of Chicago and east St. Louis, and facilitate their successful matriculation. Project 500 students do not meet the typical entrance expectations and they successfully negotiate the academically rigorous and often hostile environment of this competitive predominantly white institution<sup>xii</sup>. As observed by a former student, Joan Murphy, “We created a community among ourselves that mediated the strong, individualistic, competitive ethic of the university” (White & Shelley, 1996, p. 19).

### **Returning to Graduate School: In Pursuit of *the Right Stuff***

*“I am even more inspired that stories, that brush of imagination, are the truth in every human situation, and the rest is either bad television or the facts that pose as the tropes of power and domination.”*  
Gerald Vizenor, 1993, p. 27.

Shelley introduces me to UI faculty member James D. Anderson. I am accepted into the UI Department of Educational Policy Studies, fortunate to have Jim as my academic advisor. He, too, had worked in an Upward Bound Program. He facilitates my participation in a National Institute of Mental Health Traineeship for the Study of Institutionalized Racism and spends hours listening to my concerns about how to navigate this university environment. Curious about what may be possible here, I

serve on a search committee to select a new chancellor, pursue coursework outside my College, and the library becomes an intellectual playground where I explore journals that focus upon topics not addressed in the standard program.

I read autobiographies of W.E.B. DuBois and resonate with his illumination of how the very things that others most valued at Harvard were the things he found troubling. In 1903 he writes, “Honest and earnest criticism from those whose interests are most nearly touched,— criticism of writers by readers, of government by those governed, of leaders by those led, -- this is the soul of democracy and the safeguard of modern society” (2014, p. 49). His authenticity is inspiring: “My long-term remedy was Truth: carefully gathered scientific proof that neither color nor race determined the limits of a man’s capacity or desert. I [did not] understand how little human action is based on reason; nor did I know Karl Marx well enough to appreciate the economic foundations of human history” (1968, p. 228). He becomes a publicly engaged scholar writes a pageant, short stories, poetry, *The Brownies Book*, *The Crisis Magazine*, co-founds the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and shapes the modern civil rights movement. In 1968 he observes: “There was a day when the world rightly called Americans honest even if crude; earning their living by hard work; telling the truth no matter to whom it hurt; and going to war only in what they believed a just cause after nothing else seemed possible. Today we are lying, stealing, and killing ...we use science to help us deceive our fellows; we take wealth that we never earned and we are devoting all our energies to kill, maim and drive insane, men, women and children who dare to refuse to do what we want done. No nation threatens us. We threaten the world” (p. 415). His words are even more chilling in 2020.

### **Cleveland Rocks, Cleveland Rocks, Cleveland Rocks<sup>xiii</sup>**

In 1989, I accept a faculty position at Cleveland State University (CSU) and receive a dissertation award from the American Educational Research Association for “outstanding contribution to research methodology” for the use of culturally honoring collective storytelling with Navajo and Hopi Upward Bound participants

who pursue postsecondary education. Strongly autobiographical, immersed and openly political in its critical stance, the project intervenes in the *narrative sickness* (Freire, 1972) that pervades educational research about indigenous students. Scholarship that enacts powerful dialogue and bridges boundaries *with those with whom I study*, it provides a public hearing of and close listening to the voices and perspectives of those who have been silenced, marginalized and oppressed. It invites listening for what may be discovered from those most nearly touched by injustice in our society. My dissertation advisor, Norm Denzin, provides critical intellectual credibility for scholarly innovation. His persistent evocation of Mills' insistence that scholars pursue the nexus of biography and society, personal troubles as societal issues, opens space for publicly engaged scholarship.

CSU and the city of Cleveland are welcoming environments for my scholarly contributions. I walk into a cohort of doctoral students who lobby for the addition of a qualitative research track. Modeled after my prior work with Buddy Peshkin, we create our version of a qualitative research writing group called *The Q Continuum* with a brochure that invites others "to an alternate dimension, to boldly go where others have not gone before" in pursuit of culturally honoring research. A graduate school colleague, Warren Chapman, invites me to represent Cleveland with the Four Cities Urban Professional Development Network.<sup>xiv</sup> I join a feisty group of activists engaged in urban school reform and implementing Professional Development Schools in Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee and now Cleveland.

In Cleveland, with six years of Joyce Foundation funding, we create a broad-based *third space* stake-holder organization, Cleveland Collaborators for Positive Education (CCPE) Network, and shift established and often unequal relationships of power and expertise with a new *social glue* that welcomes each person's contribution.<sup>xv</sup> We accept Cornel West's (1993) invitation to become *jazz freedom fighters* who "cultivate an improvisational mode of protean, fluid, and flexible dispositions toward reality suspicious of 'either/or' viewpoints, dogmatic pronouncements, or supremacist ideologies" (p. 105). We conceive and implement

several innovative projects, particularly at Martin Luther King Law & Public Service Magnet High School and Middle School (MLK). These include the Urban School-Based Teacher Education Program (USTEP)<sup>xvi</sup>; a Day of Art & Public Service created in collaboration with the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Cleveland Institute of Art; a program to foster equitable use of technology in public schools; a policy seminar to reimagine an Upward Bound Program grounded in Participatory Action Research.

We create *Collaborations: A Journal of Education* in Cleveland and invite students, teachers, and community members to write collaboratively about radically democratic educational practice. Our first issue makes the following declaration:

We seek nothing less than a reclamation of the audacious sense of hope and commitment that characterized the 1960s. . . . We propose fighting *The Plague* of moral and spiritual bankruptcy that infects our community by writing in collaboration with others who share our hopes, fears, frustrations, and dreams for education in Cleveland. . . This collaborative, communal interaction facilitates interpretation of how our private problems are, in fact, as C. Wright Mills (1959) said, public issues. . . . join us in this bold adventure. (White & Sabik, 1994, p. 4-6)

Conscious with DuBois that *conflict is the soul of democracy*, we create CCPE to include practices of the MLK Conflict Mediation Program called Winning Against Violent Environments (WAVE). WAVE empowers students to issue a summons to a fellow student, teacher, or staff member to attend a mediation session led by students who are carefully trained and extremely skillful. Imagine what our world could be if all people had access to such skills.

Our work is grounded by a question George Lowery<sup>xvii</sup> continually asks: “How will our work make a difference for children in classrooms?”

**“I prayed you here”**

In 1996 I return to the southwest to visit collaborators from my dissertation research, and declare to my traveling companion, “I think I’d like to get a job at NAU (Northern Arizona University).” Two years later I give a job talk to become the chair of the Department of Instructional Leadership in the NAU College of Education. Noreen Sakiestewa, who thirty years earlier was an Upward Bound student, then a staff member when I became director, and later a collaborator in my dissertation, tells me, “You’ll get this job. I prayed you here because I need someone to direct my dissertation research”. I accept the position. Guy Senese and I join forces to generate *radically democratic possibilities* for children in Arizona’s public schools. Home to the largest teacher education program in Arizona, this job is an enormous challenge.

The department has approximately 35 tenure-track and clinical professors in Flagstaff and 200 adjunct faculty members who teach courses dispersed throughout the state. We have seven PDS partnerships that range from Sedona to the border of Mexico in Nogales. I am charged with monitoring program quality for this massive endeavor that includes numerous online and interactive instructional television courses. We have undergraduate degree programs in early childhood education, elementary education, secondary education, and vocational education, multiple master’s degree programs, and a shared doctoral program.

The first project Guy and I tackle is adding a social foundations course to the required coursework for becoming a teacher. In a conservative state like Arizona and in a college of education with a dominance of faculty members who have not themselves taken such a course in their teacher education programs, this is an uphill battle that we are seriously discouraged from pursuing. We persist, get the course accepted and this enables the hire of additional progressive faculty members.

In collaboration with the Hopi Nation I write a grant proposal to create the Hopi Teachers for Hopi Schools Project and Itaa Tsatsyom Mopeqwya (Our Children

Come First); Guy and I collaborate with the Navajo Nation and Little Singer Community School to create Alchini Ba (For the Children). These programs prepare indigenous teachers with critical focus upon the sovereignty of indigenous nations (Wilkins & Lomawaima, 2001), and culturally responsive pedagogical and program evaluation practices (White, Nuvayouma & Paymella, 2003; White & Hermes, 2005; White, Bedonie, DeGroat, Lockard & Honani, 2007; White & Senese, 2015). Two Alchini Ba students are daughters of Cheryl and Andrew Singer, former Upward Bound students and collaborators in my dissertation. Guy and I co-direct Noreen's dissertation and she becomes Director of the Hopi Department of Education.

During the three years I chair this department, we increase the cultural and theoretical diversity of the faculty with several new hires who value culturally honoring pedagogy and deeply appreciate the need to prepare politically active teacher-leaders committed to indigenous and radically democratic educational practices.

In 2002 I attend a celebration of Clarence Shelley's legacy. UI Chancellor Nancy Cantor awards him the Chancellor's Medallion, in recognition of outstanding work on behalf of the campus. I meet Nancy and am wowed by her way of being. I had not imagined a chancellor could be warm, authentic and loving. When she leaves UI for Syracuse University, Jim Anderson tells me, "the University of Illinois will never be the same because of her moral leadership." One example of this leadership is her persistent stand to remove the racist mascot, Chief Illiniwek.

### **Choosing Newark by Way of Cuban Inspiration**

*"I will carry the tradition on in good times and bad  
and build and create, create and build, build and create  
create and build. . . . .  
THE KLAN WILL DIE AND BLACK PEOPLE WILL BE VICTORIOUS!"  
(Ras Baraka, 1992, p. 89.)*

The year is 2004 and I am in Cuba to present a conference paper. Walking the streets of Old Havana, the people inspire connection. I watch families transport themselves

together on bicycles. Think about my son's work Directing Transportation Alternatives in New York City. Think of my daughter's work in California, marketing for punk rock record companies, me living in Flagstaff, and dispersed family becomes unacceptable. I secure a position as chair of the Department of Urban Education at Rutgers University Newark, my daughter and I move to New Jersey, reunite family. Sounds easy. What is not easy is finding a place to live in Newark. Known as a commuter campus, there is minimal academic community.

I join a department that has never been adequately supported inside a College of Arts & Sciences. Under the direction of an acting chair who is also the Dean of the Graduate School, it looks like this trajectory is changing. With new faculty lines, we engage with optimism our first accreditation process. However, we lose our science educator due to his lack of publications and lose that faculty line. It will be several years before Nancy Cantor becomes our chancellor and invites the campus to reward the kind of publicly engaged scholarship this faculty member pursued with the Newark Public Schools.

For decades, an invisible wall surrounds the campus, communicating that Newark residents are not welcome. Not recognizing this wall, I hire Newark Public School teacher and principal Ras Baraka to teach in our teacher education program. Ras happens to be the son of poet Amiri Baraka, formerly LeRoi Jones, who was a major participant in the early Beat and counterculture poetry movement, and an indispensable contributor to the Black literary and social consciousness of our time. We feel his presence in the current struggles and activism of the George Floyd protests internationally, and the Black Lives Matter movement generally.

We create a partnership to implement a university course taught at the high school with dual enrollment for high school students. The Dean cancels the project at the last hour. This is emblematic of a pattern born in part from a lack of deep understanding and commitment to the needs of a professional education program.

Many people in the Historic James Street Commons Neighborhood who welcome me to Newark. Neighbor Hilda Harris suggests that someone should tell the story of our neighborhood and I invite doctoral students to do so (see White et al., 2011). Once we gain IRB approval, and begin to conduct interviews, a student says, “I don’t think I will learn anything from this interview”. What is needed to better equip us to be effective publicly engaged scholars?

### **Changing My Thinking: Embracing Ontological Inquiry**

*“And we have a duty, it seems to be—those of us who are academics,  
Who are seriously involved in the world—  
to actually change our mode of thinking”*  
David Harvey, 2010.

In 2006, I write: “it may not be possible to sufficiently reform the American colonial system of education . . . to ever legitimately serve the cultural, epistemological, and ontological needs of sovereign, indigenous nations” (2006, p. 218). What are the ontological needs of human beings?

In 2012 I take a course at the Dartmouth Medical School, discover the value of ontological inquiry, begin a training program, and add it to my teaching<sup>xviii</sup> in the Rutgers Urban Teacher Education Program, Honors College, Urban Systems Doctoral Program, and Business School. I also deliver this course with two colleagues at the El Bosque Medical School in Bogota, Colombia.<sup>xix</sup>

Many students have been trained to view politics and political action as dirty, something to be avoided, and even dangerous to honorable living. Radically democratic citizen-action-in-the-world requires citizens who embrace political action as living honorably. Our embrace of ontological inquiry illuminates and challenges these and many other inherited dispositions as we engage what Michel Foucault (1984) calls “a critical ontology of ourselves . . . an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which critique of what we are is at once and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them” (p. 50).<sup>xx</sup>



As we *re-search* and deconstruct our lived experience and the meaning we assign it, as well as identities we carefully cultivate, experience as *real* and defend as *who we are*, we discover how we empower and disempower our ways of being and acting. We discover ourselves beyond our physical bodies, as capable of being “*out here*” in the world as the *word* we say we are. Instead of the conceptual lives we have been thrown into, we begin living created lives grounded in what we want to contribute to the world.

### **A Revolutionary Vision of the Public University**

*“I am sure that we are providing our students a great education, I’m equally sure that we are letting them down in important ways—not feeding their yearning to be living the biggest ontological and existential questions they see unfolding around them and don’t know quite how to embrace, attending chiefly to their minds when their hearts (and ours) are being broken by events in the world”*

Diana Chapman Walsh, 2005, p. 10.

*“We need to deconstruct and reconstruct . . . who we are and how we do our work, moving . . . to spaces that welcome diversity, energetic dialogue, and two-way streets of collaboration . . . with others in creating a world where everyone can win.”*

Nancy Cantor, 2013, p. 4.

We live in troubled times on a burning planet and we fail to prepare our students effectively for this stark reality. Following her presidency of Wellesley, Diana Chapman Walsh offered the above damning observation. Typical university coursework, grounded in an epistemological approach, overvalues *informative knowing* and grants minimal attention to *ontological inquiry*, which questions what it means to be a human being. I imagine it is this investment in *Cartesian subjectivity* that has my former student say she doubted she could learn anything from speaking with my neighbor. She *knew* prior to inquiry. This *cultivated contempt prior to investigation* is rampant in the university system today and provides limited access to the cultivation of the kind of authentic listening that enables us to actually hear the suffering of our fellow citizens and then take action to prevent it.

In 2014 Nancy Cantor becomes the chancellor of Rutgers University Newark. She invites the campus to embrace *publicly engaged scholarship* as she conducts a listening tour with the local community. What this looks like is her sitting around a dining room table, with me and about 10 neighbors, listening. She listens across the city with multiple stakeholders to discover what they want in our public university. She convenes working groups of students, faculty and staff members to likewise reimagine our university. She issues funding opportunities and grants funding to me and a colleague to create a new course that utilizes ontological inquiry with engaged public scholarship.

Ontological inquiry is a counter-intuitive and often uncomfortable pedagogical intervention that generates disruption at the institution and violations of academic freedom that require me to file a grievance through the Rutgers AAUP-AFT Union. With Mills (1959), I “use life experience in intellectual work” (p. 196) and now serve on the Union Executive Council, as secretary for our Newark chapter and have a new research project that illuminates how bullying in the university silences academic freedom and undermines the education of students. I create a new course, *Collaborative Leadership and Social Innovation*, that uses the same ontological/phenomenological model. A new elective course open to enrollment for undergraduate and graduate students from every college on the campus, it nurtures skills that are critical to students being effective publicly engaged scholars in the tradition of C. Wright Mills and W.E.B. DuBois. A recent student, Anna Agbotse, is awarded the 2020 Rutgers Class of 1962 Presidential Public Service Award in recognition of her non-compensated service to empower youth political participation in Ghana. (See <https://mobile.twitter.com/watvorg>). Another course, *Publicly Engaged Pedagogy and Research* is scheduled for 2021.

So, I end with the details, the nuts and bolts, of another project and now, like you I must figure out how to accomplish goals, build community and solidarity with the new Plague raging in my country. Sickness and recovery were predicted. Politically motivated, preventable national disaster has unfolded, and we are shamed,

and even pitied for new reasons in the eyes of the world. But tomorrow there will be public spaces. They represent the commonwealths, the democratic spaces we manage and hand to the next generations.

### **Coda**

*“But everywhere is the ultimate act of treason  
That so few can be aware that their nation's heart is bleeding”  
From the band, *Bad Religion*, 2019.<sup>xxi</sup>*

The United States when at its best, has inspired democratic possibilities around the globe yet fails our democratic experiment at home. At its worst, its capitalist imperatives have worked toward destruction, not democracy nor the “flourishing” that Dewey said would be the test for any society claiming democracy. This capitalism is as we know unbounded and scours democratic societies, scavenging for anything and anyone it can exploit. This acceleration of the capitalist imperative, now privileging a new/neo liberalism where freedom is that license to exploit and pursue profit. Naturally then U.S. capitalists are equal opportunity exploiters, and they have turned with a vengeance on their own people.

We lead among developed nations in income inequality, poverty rate, worst child well-being, lowest social mobility, highest health care costs, highest infant mortality rate, highest obesity rate, highest anti-depressant use, shortest life expectancy at birth, highest carbon emissions, worst gender inequality, highest military spending, most arms sales, highest incarceration rate, worst murder rate. We lead with Covid-19 infection rates, over 130,000 deaths and rapidly rising: 5.4 million American citizens have lost their medical insurance during the pandemic. We have a neo-fascist thug<sup>xxii</sup> as president who actively generates chaos. He claims climate change is a hoax and that the coronavirus might be cured by injecting disinfectant or by simply stopping testing, as he withdraws support for the World Health Organization. In service to greed, the federal government makes corporations privileged citizens, vilifies science and educators, decimates education and health care systems, empowers a *school to prison pipeline*, rapes our natural resources, and

fails to protect citizens in the most fundamental ways, most glaringly apparent among people of color.

On lock-down in our homes, the engine of predatory disaster capitalism halts and clean air emerges. Absent our tranquilized obviousness of normalized routine, plugged into social media, we witness the videotaped *public lynching* of George Floyd. American imperialist aggression *at home* is illuminated. Protest and rebellion erupt, people take to the streets, raise their voices in grief and outrage, as global uprising answers the historical invitation issued by pandemics for humans to “break with the past and imagine their world anew. . . We can choose to walk through it [this portal], dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it” (Roy, 2020, p. 13).

As I write this article, the Rutgers AAUP-AFT forms a coalition of 19 Rutgers Unions to fight layoffs approved by outgoing Rutgers President Barchi of our most vulnerable workers, many of whom are people of color. James Holloway becomes Rutgers’ first African American president July 1, 2020, gives a talk for the University of Sydney and says, “If we aren’t prepared to acknowledge all of the workers at Rutgers . . . the people who clean the restrooms and make the food or drive us around, we are perpetuating a problem as old as the institution [founded in 1766] and that part we need to change.”

So, one day, one student, one project, at a time. Failure IS an option. If not us who, if not now when? I’d like the security of a guarantee, something to really count on in insecure times. It’s unfortunate that I can only count on failure. I can ask myself, “*You want predictive validity, certainty beyond doubt? Then, do not imagine insurgency, don’t dream solidarity, don’t study it, discuss it, write on it, build community and resistance toward it. Do nothing and failure, well, it’s guaranteed!*” I think I’d rather take my dog for a walk on my block in Newark, then get some sleep, maybe have a dream, wake up, have a cup of coffee, and go to work.

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### Footnotes

<sup>i</sup> As observed by Audre Lorde (1981), "Survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 99).

<sup>ii</sup> This is akin to Ralph Waldo Emerson's advice that to discover our path in life we avoid attempting to know the consistency that is unfolding.

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- <sup>iii</sup> Her title taken from Henrik Ibsen's play by the same name, written with a similar quest to live afresh.
- <sup>iv</sup> Recorded by Buffalo Springfield, lyrics from the song For What It's Worth. [www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/stephenstills/forwhatits...](http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/stephenstills/forwhatits...)
- <sup>v</sup> Part of the U.S. War on Poverty, Upward Bound is a precollege preparatory program designed to remedy poor academic preparation and motivation in secondary school and thus increase a youngster's potential for acceptance and success in a college environment.
- <sup>vi</sup> Publicly engaged scholarship is innovative work directly related to a scholar's academic expertise that is of benefit to the external community, is visible and shared with community stakeholders, is collaborative, has public and scholarly impact, and reflects the mission of the university.
- <sup>vii</sup> The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the G.I. Bill, was a law that provided a range of benefits for returning World War II veterans (commonly referred to as G.I.s). The original G.I. Bill expired in 1956, but the term "G.I. Bill" is still used to refer to programs created to assist U.S. military veterans, their survivors and dependents.
- <sup>viii</sup> On his website, he writes: "A lot of this has to do with the fact that I was born and brought up in Ebbw Vale when it was a thriving coal and steel town on the north eastern rim of the South Welsh coalfield. That place, and the ways that it's has changed over the years since, has made a great impression upon me and upon the way I have developed as a sociologist "<https://huwbeynon.com/about/>
- <sup>ix</sup> Sister Sledge - We Are Family Lyrics | AZLyrics.com
- <sup>x</sup> *Hogan* is a one-room, traditional Navajo structure built of logs and mud with an entrance that faces east.
- <sup>xi</sup> TRIO is an acronym that originated as a designation for Upward Bound, Talent Search and Special Services Programs. Other programs like Educational Opportunity Centers have been added under the umbrella of this acronym. All are federally funded compensatory education programs.
- <sup>xii</sup> Shelley writes: "We were involved in a holy war armed with righteousness, a modern day Children's Crusade, and God was on our side. But a funny thing happened on the way to Canaan. Pharaoh didn't fall" (p. 18). In White, Sakiestewa & Shelley (1998), he adds, "The colleagues of the late 1960s and early 1970s were convinced that the institutions would have to change drastically if our students were to be successful. Well, guess what: They are and it didn't! Our great miscalculations were in not reading our history, in not appreciating the pervasiveness and depth of social and institutional racism, classism, and sexism, and not predicting accurately the impact of institutions on our staffs and students while assuming the impact of the contrary" (p. 451).
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ian Hunter's 1979 song "Cleveland Rocks" is an anthem for the city of Cleveland, OH.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Members implement the Professional Development School (PDS) model of urban teacher preparation that includes offering coursework (often team-taught) on-site in urban schools with teacher candidates active in school activities.
- <sup>xv</sup> Examples of this include MLK security guard, Tim Roberts and science teacher, Vivian Robinson-Lee, co-teaching a graduate course with me and MLK students conducting interviews and videotaping teachers and administrators for an evaluation of the work of CCPE.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Years later I receive an email from former USTEP student, Robert E. Early. He lists former classmates and the urban schools where they are teaching, adding, "I thought you would like to know that the Jazz Freedom Fighters are out in the field spreading the word." See Storz (1998) and Burney, et al. (2005) for more about CCPE projects.
- <sup>xvii</sup> George worked with Upward Bound and was then Dean, College of Education, Mercy College in Detroit.



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<sup>xviii</sup> Called *Being a Leader and the Effective Exercise of Leadership: An Ontological/Phenomenological Model*, this course was created primarily by Werner Erhard, this course uses ontological inquiry to evoke new being for human beings. For more information see Erhard et al, 2012. See Hyde & Kopp, 2019 for detail about this pedagogy.

<sup>xix</sup> Part of 80 professors from the Canada, Colombia, England, Ethiopia, Germany, Ghana, Guatemala, Iran, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Netherlands, South Africa, Switzerland, Thailand, Trinidad & Tobago, U.S.A., United Arab Emirates, and Vietnam who engage ongoing professional development to deliver this course.

<sup>xx</sup> After RosiBraidotti (2013), this pedagogy incites “becoming posthuman . . . redefining one’s sense of attachment and connection to a shared world [of] multiple ecologies of belonging, while it enacts the transformation of one’s sensorial and perceptual co-ordinates, in order to acknowledge the collective nature and out-bound direction of what we still call the self” (p. 193, 195).

<sup>xxi</sup> Lyrics from the song *Age of Unreason* released May 3, 2019, written by Gurewitz/Graffin, for the punk rock band Bad Religion.

<sup>xxii</sup> He uses the word thug to describe protesters exercising their constitutional rights. My use is taken from the Urban Dictionary: A thug is typically referred to a male or female who commits crimes for personal gain through stealing, selling drugs, but especially violent crimes such as robbery and assault.

### **About the Author**

Carolyne J. White is a Professor of Social Foundations in the Department of Urban Education at Rutgers University Newark. Her current research focuses critical posthumanism and pedagogy that utilizes ontological inquiry to disrupt Cartesian Colonialism and provide access to new being for human beings. She is co-editing a book titled, *Ontological Inquiry in Higher Education: A Declaration Whose Time Has Come*, for which she is working with authors from Africa, England, Iran, Switzerland, and the United States.

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