

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Cross This Out: A Pedagogy of Disruption and Healing

by G.T. Reyes



G.T. REYES, OUR DOOR WITH A CROSS THIS OUT QUILT

This was not my first encounter with a blatant act of racism. It was not a good feeling. Acts of racism, whether blatant or as microaggression, never are. I had had to respond to various forms of racism before. Although I am an early career Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership, I have been in the world of urban education and community organizing for some time now. The current iteration of me has serendipitously had enough practice with responding to acts of systemic oppression to face this new one with dignity, criticality, and creativity.

Towards the end of my first quarter working at California State University, East Bay, I received a text from my colleague that she would be re-printing signs for the door that my officemate and I share—ours had apparently been “marked up,” she mentioned. When I first received her text, I was disappointed, but also appreciative of her offer to reprint them. The marked-up signs had read, “Black Lives Matter,” “Brown and Proud – Todos Somos Arizona,” and “All students are welcome here whatever your ethnicity, sexual expression, gender identification, gender identity, political stance, or immigration status.” Although there were similar signs on most of the office doors within this wing of the College of Education, ours was the only one that was marked up. I immediately asked for a photo.

From this photo, it was clear that more than a reprinting of signs was needed. At first glance, I could see that “Educational Leadership” was also crossed out and my officemate’s name plate, which was underneath mine, was reversed as if to invisibilize her. My officemate is a powerful African American woman who stands for ideals similar to mine, and seeing her name plate reversed conveyed a violence beyond a mere mark-up. However, not until I received an email from my department’s administrative coordinator saying she would order me a new name plate—she had been unable to remove the marking from the existing one—did I realize something more directly personal.

I had been targeted. In addition to the signs, my name was also crossed out with permanent marker. It was as if someone was saying to me, “We want to be clear, Dr. Reyes. You are on notice for representing beliefs that we reject and that we cross out. As such, we cross YOU out.”

Cross This Out: A Story and Framework to Inspire Critical Action

In this article, I recount the events and experiences from what I call “Cross This Out.” I share this *testimonio* (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012) first to be in relationship with you as the reader. I seek to connect with your own racialized experiences, your work, and you as human beyond this article. Second, I aim to make transparent the undergirding principles that critically

informed my response to our door. To be clear, what happened was not simply vandalism. This was a visual-spatial violation as well as negation of radicalized ideas and people. Unfortunately, such acts are all too common. As such, visibilizing the principles that informed my designed response aims to invoke your agency through offering a versatile framework that can be adapted to different contexts. To assist with invoking one’s radical imagination (Kelly, 2002), I also share how other educators across the country have implemented these principles within their own contexts.

My hope in sharing Cross This Out is that we are reminded that radical pedagogies do not exist solely within the four walls of our classrooms. We can act and we can make that action public alongside our students and colleagues. As such, radical pedagogies reach out and up in order to respire, inspire, and conspire. That is, our radical pedagogies facilitate the respiration of hope, courage, and affirmation into our humanity. Radical pedagogies inspire



FIGURE 1. OUR OFFICE DOOR WITH SIGNS CROSSED OUT.

us to imagine futures that are absent of oppressive conditions, as well as engage us in a praxis that maps such futurity. Finally, my hope in invoking the radical imagination conspires to be disruptive by interrogating the very practices and structures that systemically inhibit our well-being in the first place.

Cross This Out: A Designed Response

One thing I learned from being a leader of a school and community-based organization was that when an oppressive and/or traumatic act occurs, a timely and thoughtful response that is rooted in both critical courage and love is necessary. People are always waiting to see how a leader responds. That includes students in your classroom and school, as well as the adults within your school and the

surrounding community. Such responses grounded in critical courage and love send messages about where folks stand, what is valued, and what will not be quietly accepted. Critical courage and love also require that we consider our own humanity and need for justice, healing, and self-preservation.

Not responding is also a response—one that conveys just the opposite message. I responded the very next day from when my door was first violated. As I considered what my actual response would be, it occurred to me that if someone felt emboldened enough to cross something out, I could cross things out too. My overall message was “If you want to cross something out, then cross *this* out.”



FIGURES 2. OUR DOOR WITH A CROSS THIS OUT QUILT.

The idea of crossing something out became the central idea behind my designed response. I created and installed what I called the “Cross This Out” quilt. Each “quilt tile” was made of cardstock that contained a specific idea that I either sought to courageously “cross out” or embrace as a value. Since I believed that the timeliness of my action was important, I had to also balance the simplicity and attractiveness of my design. The form of the quilt—paper, large print, intentional use of color and grey tones—was designed to be bold, eclipsing, and modular. Though not intentional at first, the form of the quilt’s design also made it easily accessible for others to install their own. After I installed the quilt, I quickly learned that such accessibility would be valuable.

Cross This Out: Four Principles That Guide a Pedagogy of Disruption, Healing, Mobilizing

Within a few days, several people had requested copies of my quilt design. The first batch of quilts that I shared included only words. In full transparency, some of the words represented universal ideas, which meant they also lacked precision of intended meaning. For instance, my first version of the quilt included ideas such as “love” and “hope.” When others started to request permission to modify the content of the quilt, I noticed some added words such as “tolerance” and “acceptance.” Because I did not want the critical perspectives that grounded my design to be lost or misinterpreted as they seemed to be doing in some cases, I realized that I might need to articulate a stance.

Creating a stance could explicitly frame the nature of the quilt’s design and intended purposes. In order for this stance to consistently capture the essence of my intentions, it had to possess an architecture that was principled, values-centered, socio-historically grounded, and higher purpose-driven (Reyes & Zermeño, 2018). Before continuing with discussing Cross This Out, let me pause briefly to describe this architecture.

Possessing an architecture is to have a design and structure. A stance that has an architecture that is principled, values-centered, socio-historically grounded, and higher purpose-driven creates an interconnected design with multiple layers that have social justice aims. Being *principled* meant that articulated beliefs and perspectives would act as a foundation of reasoning for both the purposes of the design and the design itself. In this manner, a system of beliefs could be articulated in such a way that could be versatily applied towards different contexts, while still being rooted in a set of foundational principles.

A *values-centered* stance commits to a humanizing practice that is rooted in values deemed important, and in the case of Cross This Out, important to me. Developing a stance that is centered around values requires transparency in terms of not only what one believes, but what one believes *in*. For Cross This Out, the choice of words that were not crossed out represented ideas that I valued – that I believed *in*. What I valued was also represented in what I rejected – those ideas that I crossed out.

A stance that is explicitly grounded by a *socio-historical* analysis ensures that the creation of the stance is informed by and situated in a larger body of discourses that unapologetically critique systems of oppression and how they have manifested in society. Additionally, critical discourses that provide a socio-historical analysis help to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between our specific contexts and the systemic and reproductive nature of oppression. In the case of Cross This Out, I invoked concepts such as the *Beloved Community* as discussed by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, *Self-Determination* as facilitated by Huey P. Newton, and *Self-Preservation* as framed by Audre Lorde.

Lastly, a stance that drives towards a *higher purpose* reveals a social justice vision rooted in a collective hope

(Ginwright, 2016) that moves beyond the immediate moment. Too often our purposes are confined to short-term, one-dimensional, technocratic, individualistic, and apolitical goals. Watson (2018) adds, "social justice does not just live in our heads, but also in our hearts—and most definitely in our hands and feet. In other words, it is not merely what is conceived that is revolutionary, but what is achieved" (p. 16). A stance must always remind us of our higher purpose and what we want to achieve. Cross This Out's higher purpose aimed to go beyond installing a visual arts exhibit as a counter to vandalism. Cross This Out aimed to invoke praxis in the hallways, in the classrooms, in the assemblies, on social media. It sought to create conditions that invited dialogue about the meaning and impacts of concepts articulated on quilt tiles. It invited self-reflection and further exploration of what one believes *in* and what one stands against.

As the quilt was quickly being disseminated, I realized that my principled, values-centered, socio-historically grounded, and higher purpose-driven intentions were being missed. I needed to interrupt this immediately because I believed deeply that my intentions behind Cross This Out were radical. Upon careful reflection, I soon released a second iteration of Cross This Out that included more precise word choices and an introductory framing. I articulated a set of principles organized by the four areas listed below as part of that framing:

1. Culture of Critique
2. Action and (R)evolution
3. Teaching and Learning
4. Healing

Cross This Out: Cultivating a Culture of Critique

Cross This Out must stand in the political sphere of culture in ways that its visual nature acts not only to inspire others to participate and provoke thought, but also to incite critical dialogue and self-reflection around complex ideas that open up a critique of systems of oppression. That is why the selection of terms is complex and specific. On the surface, Cross This Out may seem like a "positive" response rooted in "acceptance." I assure you, though, that was not my intent. I wanted to provoke people's critical curiosity and open up opportunities for teaching and learning. A concept such as "love" is universal to the point that no one would likely question it or engage in dialogue about it. Seeing "love" professed would certainly incite good feelings of positivity, but I needed to provoke more.

For instance, from the Critical Pedagogy tradition that can be traced to Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970), more nuanced concepts like "revolutionary love" (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008) and "political love" (Sandoval, 2000) were also invoked in the quilt. Both of these derivatives of love contain an analysis of oppression that most people would not know. However, the intent to invoke critical ideas that stemmed from universal notions was to tap into one's familiarity with certain ideals (e.g., "love")

while also catalyzing enough of a pause from any viewer to create a slight dissonance. The right kind and amount of dissonance can incite one's critical curiosity (Camangian, 2013). To do that, I knew that this action could not be one that sat within the polite terrain of neoliberalism.

If Cross This Out were a neoliberal effort, I would not have highlighted radical concepts such as "radical healing," "critical care," or "indigeneity," all which have been thoroughly examined, theorized, and/or researched within critical, sociocultural discourses. Rather, I might have chosen more neoliberal, mainstreamed concepts such as "tolerance," "inclusion," "acceptance," or "diversity." If this were a neoliberal effort, I would not have drawn attention to complex and controversial ideas such as "white supremacy," "toxic masculinity," or "settler colonialism" that could potentially open up teaching and learning opportunities of these particular forms of systemic oppression. If this were a neoliberal effort, I would have chosen more general, bumper sticker-like, depoliticized concepts like "inequality" instead.

No. My response was rooted in a critically-informed stance that rejected systems of hate, supremacy, and oppression. It did not seek inclusion. It sought to disrupt the very systems that intended to exclude minoritized folks like me in the first place.

Cross This Out: Cultivating Action and (R)Evolution

Cross This Out must not only inspire action, it must encourage agency, creativity, and critical (r)evolution. Educators, organizers, and youth/young adult advocates must be able to access the essence of Cross This Out, while also evolving it in revolutionary ways that are culturally responsive to their own contexts. Knowing where we stand on issues and events is important; how we stand there is crucial.

While my officemate and I were the only ones in our hallway whose door received racially-motivated vandalism, we were never alone in having to respond to it. *Where I*

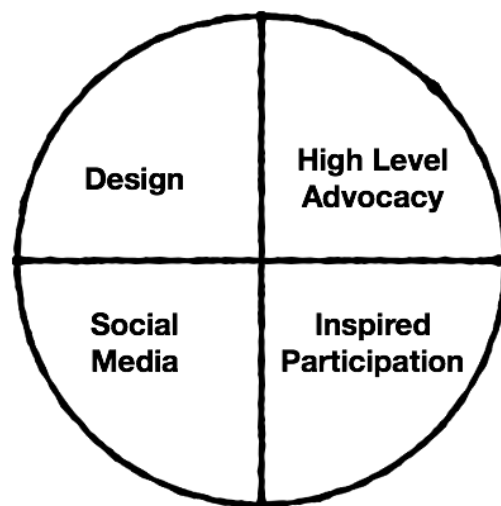


FIGURE 3. ACTIONS TO TRANSFORM AN INDIVIDUAL RESPONSE INTO COMMUNITY MOVEMENT.

stood on racialized oppression was demonstrated by *how* I stood there when the moment arose. That single action, however, invited many others to both show *where* they stood and *how* they stood there as well. Four actions intersected to transform my individual response into an emerging community movement.

First, the design, content, and accessibility of the form itself—the Cross This Out Quilt—was not only boldly visible and easily readable once installed, it was also made available as a PDF file, a packet of already printed-out card stocks, and as a single unit, door-sized poster. Having these three forms of the quilt readily available for others to use dramatically reduced the potential barriers associated with having to invest significant labor and thought towards creating one’s own quilt. At the same time, the modularity of the design that involved each quilt tile being a separate 8.5 x 11 piece of paper made it so that individuals installing a quilt could reconfigure it in their own way.

Second, even though I considered myself an intermediate user at best, I leveraged the social media platforms of Facebook and Twitter, while employing a movement building medium: the hashtag. In my postings, along with my description of what happened and how I responded, I invited others to utilize the PDF file I provided to install their own quilt, take a picture of it, and then post it under the hashtag, #CrossThisOut. I believed that with the assistance of these social media technologies, folks who had not installed their own quilt could get inspired not only by my actions, but also by others. I wanted to invoke the sense that folks could be a part of something bigger than any one individual.

Third, my college Dean and the university’s Chief Diversity Officer both championed my quilt response. They viewed my action as a model of how to lovingly, critically, and creatively respond to acts of oppression. As such, they not only encouraged others to install a Cross This Out quilt on their door/wall, they also had several printed-out packets available for other faculty/staff to take. Their advocacy as people with positional authority carried weight in inspiring others.

Fourth, the combination of the first and second actions, which focused on disseminating the quilt and inviting others to install their own and post a photo to #CrossThisOut, created momentum in ways that moved beyond people I knew. Within a week, several people both on my campus as well as other university and K–12 campuses in and outside of California posted their unique designs of the Cross This Out quilt. It became less about who I was and what I did and more about what we all valued. It was not that Cross This Out *gave* agency or “voice to the voiceless.” Cross This Out merely helped others to showcase the powerful work they were already doing in an accessible format that was simultaneously building community and a movement. Their inspired participation was contagious.

Cross This Out: Cultivating Teaching and Learning

Cross This Out must invite and inspire extended teaching, learning, and organizing opportunities alongside students. We must shift the traditional teacher–student relationship towards one that recognizes teachers as students and students as teachers. For instance, as the photos and #CrossThisOut postings started to emerge on social media, I was excited to see what I did not anticipate. I saw teachers and program coordinators working alongside their students to create their own version of the quilt from scratch.

Through social media, I also saw words that I had not initially thought of from elementary students all the way up to graduate students who made their own quilts that crossed out ideas such as “gun violence” and “police brutality.” In a 7th grade middle school English/Language Arts class, these words also extended to writing what the teacher, Ms. Gente, called a “critical essay project.” This project involved

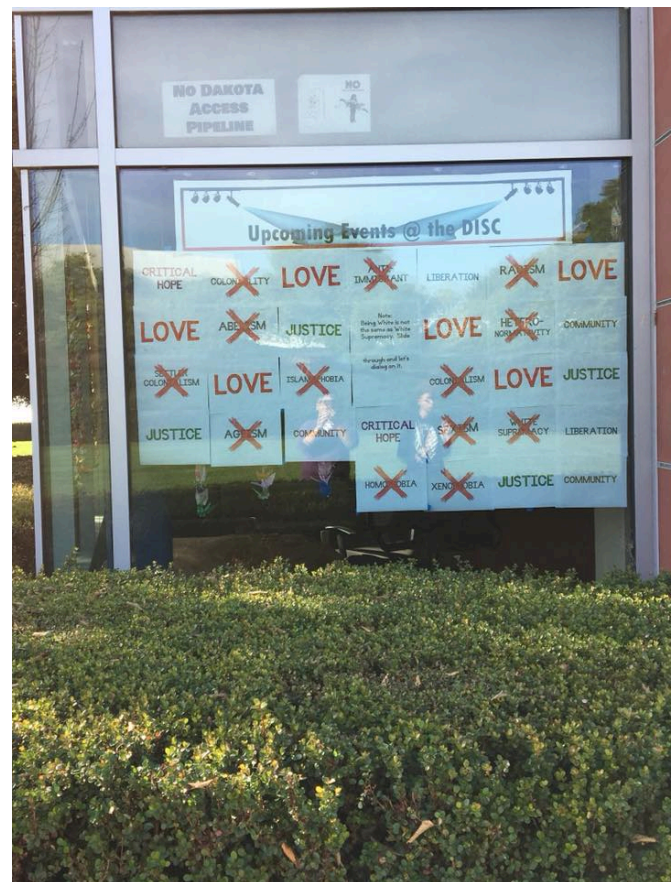


FIGURE 4. CROSS THIS OUT SENT FROM COLLEAGUES AND STUDENTS WORKING IN THE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION STUDENT CENTER AT CSU EAST BAY.

students researching a community issue and asserting a position on it. Ms. Gente shared a critical essay by one of her students, Jelani (all names used in this article are pseudonyms). Entitled, “Racial Profiling and Police Brutality in the Town,” Jelani maps out an argument that begins with examining data:

The community-based organization, Mapping Police Violence, said that black people are three times more

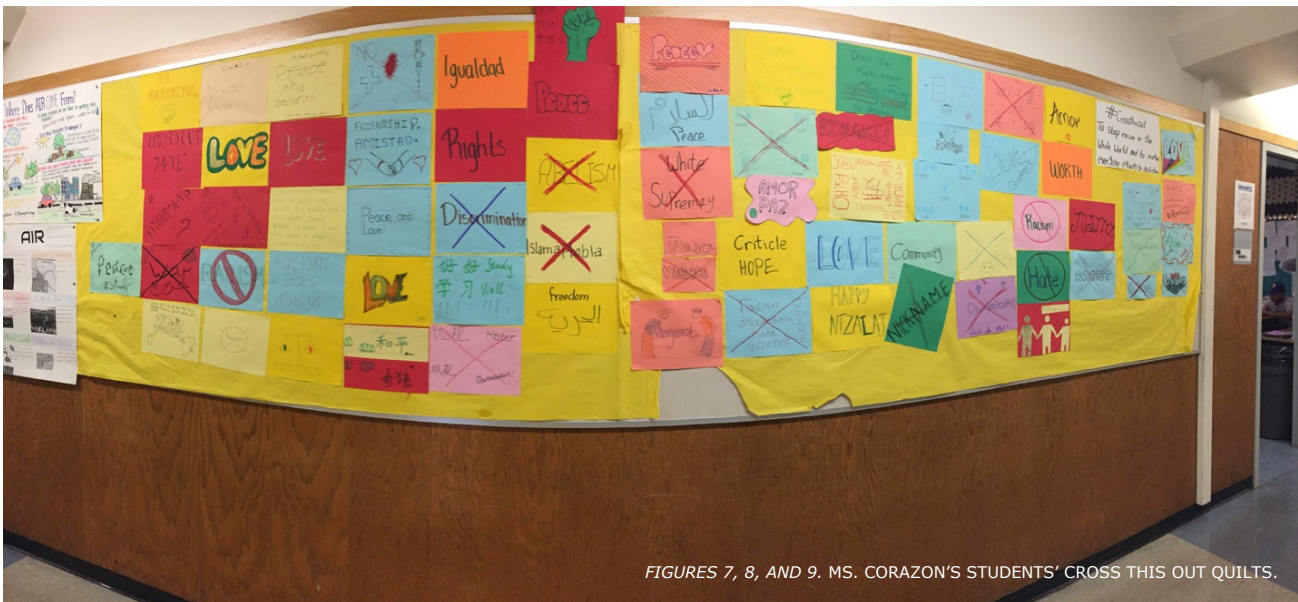
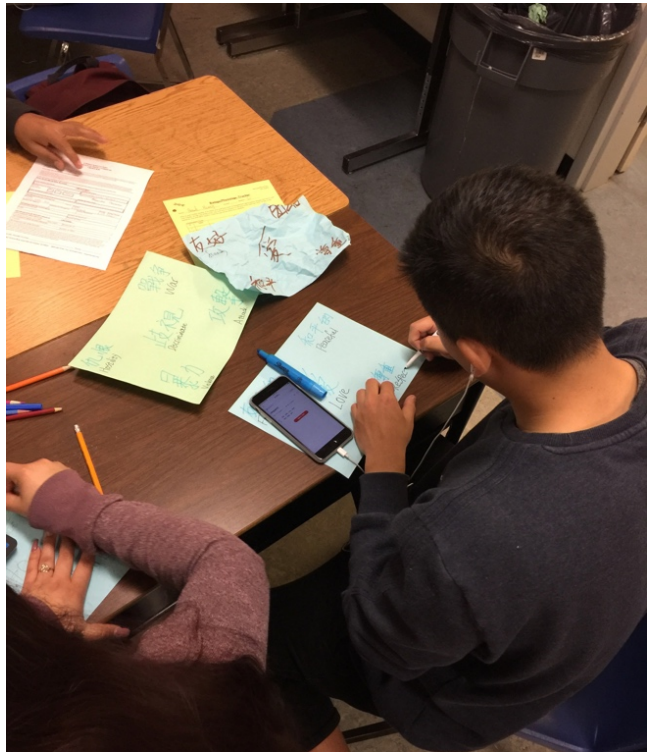
to continually resist and counter systemically oppressive acts.

GINWRIGHT (2016) makes a distinction between systemic oppression and suffering. Oppression is the structure of beliefs, practices, processes, behaviors, and language uses that “limit opportunities, restrict freedoms, and constrain liberties for marginalized groups” (p. 28). Suffering, however, is the result of the compounding and cumulative internal traumas of experiencing oppression. Often, people who commit to fighting injustice are so outwardly focused that their energy is heavily directed towards the fight outside of their bodies. In many cases, this commitment comes from a sustained history of experiencing systemic oppression from an early age. The effects of experiencing systemic oppression accumulate (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012;

Smith, Yosso & Solórzano, 2007; Solórzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002).

As these effects compound over time without engagement in intentional healing justice work, people can prematurely age. Public health scholar Dr. Arline Geronimus (1992) called this “weathering.” Her research examined how age does not hold the same effect for all people. Geronimus found that experiencing a lifetime of socioeconomic, racialized, and gendered oppressions at the individual and community level made African American women, in particular, age more rapidly than other ethnic groups.

Given this, when we allow those experienced oppressions to remain in the part of our brain that regulates emotions, we internalize them into our body. When we



FIGURES 7, 8, AND 9. MS. CORAZON'S STUDENTS' CROSS THIS OUT QUILTS.

receive traumatic experience after experience, threat after threat, we can get numb to them. We start saying “it is what it is” or “it’s whatever.” We get exhausted. We get burnt out. Over time, we get weathered.

As educators grounded in a commitment to continually work towards a more just and healthy world, we often work so relentlessly hard that we do not realize when we internalize the daily traumas faced throughout the course of our fight. Fighting oppression, as well as carrying those that our students face, is still traumatic. When we continuously neglect the trauma and suffering that we experience over time, our brain causes us to lose awareness and attentiveness over our bodies.

The part of our brain that first experiences the suffering caused by oppression is the one that regulates emotion and threats. This part of our brain viscerally catalyzes our fight or flight responses. Our brain also does not distinguish between physical, emotional, mental, and social threats. A threat is a threat—it sends the same signals throughout our body that trigger our need to fight or flee.

Even though I did not perceive the act of some unknown person(s) crossing out ideas I stood for as a physical threat, I certainly realized that I was under threat. That evening when I first saw the photo of my door and through the next day when I created and installed my Cross This Out quilt, my body was experiencing a heightened state of anxiety and alertness. These were symptoms of suffering. At the same time, since I am a trained and experienced martial artist, my body felt as if I was anticipating a physical fight.

Imagine our students who face such conditions day in and out. To be under a constant state of threat means that they are also under a constant state of heightened anxiety and alertness. On the block, we might refer to that heightened state as being “armored up.” Such an existence is not only emotionally exhausting, but also mentally and physically draining as well. That exhaustion is internalized by the body if there are not intentional conditions and practices in place to process the traumas and nurture the necessary healing.

Our work as educators within our institutions, with our coworkers, our students, and their families places us in positions where oppression, trauma, and threats can be experienced both directly and indirectly. The structure of schooling is such that its fast pace, demanding schedule, multiple competing priorities, and variety of personalities with unique experiences create conditions that make us continually move and continually move *on* without taking the necessary time to pause, work through traumatic experiences, and humanize ourselves by listening, validating, understanding, and processing. The ways that schools are organized also maintain a hyper focus on developing and implementing “solutions” before thoroughly and critically problematizing situations first. If we do not have a thorough analysis of a problem, then it is likely that our solution will neither be sustainable nor effective. As a result, the very nature of working within a school setting can be traumatic.

However, when we employ the part of our brain that controls cognitive processing, we can productively work

through trauma and towards healing. We interrupt the weathering process. Our work in schools does not only have to be traumatic and singularly defined by the oppression experienced (Ginwright, 2016). Our work can and should be centered upon healing as well. The power of the work we do in schools is that we do it *with* and *in* community. This makes possible the liberatory potential of cultivating collective hope. Healing does not have to be a solo endeavor. Our healing is not only *self*-preservation—it is also *community* preservation.

The work I did to create Cross This Out helped me to process the trauma I had experienced. It helped me to employ the cognitive processing part of my brain in order to interrupt my suffering from settling too far into my body. But what I did not realize at the time was that the creation and installation of Cross This Out had also cultivated collective hope.

A Movement of Collective Hope

What I realized through the Cross This Out journey was that folks were activating a process of healing—for themselves, for those whom they worked with, and for anyone who walked by their door. Together and individually, we were processing the ways in which visual symbols of oppression often get invisibilized, which unknowingly also traumatizes us. Rather than seeing another racially motivated sign or act of vandalism that went unaddressed, though, Cross This Out allowed us all to take a collective stand. It said to those who had witnessed and/or experienced similar acts, “You are not alone” and “We got you.” It began to open up dialogue toward cultivating collective hope.

As I was taking a photo of my newly quilted door, two young Arab women walked past me. I cannot say I knew what they thought, felt, or even said to one another, but they stopped. I heard them talk to each other in their native tongue. They smiled at each other. They smiled at me. Then they took their own photo of my door. I was so moved at what had just happened, that I did not think to stop and ask them what they thought. I just allowed myself to experience the unspoken connection. I experienced collective hope.

One teacher from Minnesota, who had worked with his English class to create their own Cross This Out quilt, shared with me a reflection written by one of his students, Esperanza:

Why “Cross this out” was so crucial for me to participate and create as much posters I could think of was due to a lot of reasons. One being, as a person of color I want to do everything I can to advocate and raise awareness. Another reason being because by doing this small action I’m not only making myself feel better, but I could make others feel better as well. I can potentially make a better environment by letting my peers know that this isn’t tolerated here and it should be treated as a safe place where everyone should be valued and welcomed. Another reason, as a teenager having to walk through life constantly being patronized and told what to do, a project like this that lets you take charge

and voice your opinion couldn't be passed up. So that's what this project means to me. (Esperanza, personal communication, March 2, 2018).

In Esperanza's reflection, she revealed her sense of agency to not only get involved with her school community, but also to send a values-centered message that she believed was needed. She also revealed her agency to be a part of her own healing and the healing of others. Such messages, especially from young people, communicate to other youth the importance of expressing one's voice not as an end goal or product, but rather as part of an ongoing process of cultivating collective hope.

Visual symbols such as Cross This Out stand in opposition to the public hate that increasingly pervades our country to the point where people become inured to it. Cross This Out sits at the intersection of community organizing, teaching and learning, and healing in ways that help to embolden us to not shake our heads and remain silent, to never be silent, to never accept acts of supremacy and domination as the norm. If some people are emboldened to cross out Black Lives Matter signs or put up "It's okay to be white" posters, then we must also be emboldened to publicly show what we stand for and how we stand there. We must do so in ways that are not only inclusive of others, moreover, but also in ways where our actions aim to disrupt, dismantle, heal from, and reconfigure the very systems and practices that excluded us in the first place. In that process, we collectively heal. What will you cross out?

References

- Camangian, P. (2013). Teach like lives depend on it: Agitate, arouse, and inspire. *Urban Education*. Republished December 18, 2013. DOI:10.1177/0042085913514591.
- Delgado Bernal, D., Burciaga, R., & Flores Carmona, J. (2012). Chicana/Latina testimonios: Mapping the methodological, pedagogical, and political. *Equity & excellence in education*, 45(3), 363-372.
- Duncan-Andrade, J. & Morrell, E. (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. M. Ramos (Trans.). New York: Continuum.
- Geronimus, A. T. (1992). The weathering hypothesis and the health of African-American women and infants: evidence and speculations. *Ethnicity & Disease*, 2(3), 207-221.
- Ginwright, S. (2016). *Hope and healing in urban education: How urban activists and teachers are reclaiming matters of the heart*. New York: Routledge.
- Kelly, R. (2002). *Freedom dreams: The Black radical imagination*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Kohli, R., & Solórzano, D. G. (2012). Teachers, please learn our names!: Racial microaggressions and the K-12 classroom. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 15(4), 441-462.
- Sandoval, C. (2000). *Methodology of the oppressed*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Smith, W. A., Yosso, T. J., & Solórzano, D. G. (2007). Racial primes and Black misandry on historically White campuses: Toward critical race accountability in educational administration. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43(5), 559-585.
- Solorzano, D., Allen, W. R., & Carroll, G. (2002). Keeping race in place: Racial microaggressions and campus racial climate at the University of California, Berkeley. *Chicano-Latino Law Review*, 23, 15.
- Watson, V. M. (2018). *Transformative schooling: Towards racial equity in education*. New York: Routledge.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.library.pitt.edu/dscribe/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.library.pitt.edu/).