RADICAL TEACHER

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

DEI as a Practice of Assembling: Translation and Transformation

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How I Got Here, Or What is Critical DEI?

Regardless of its colonial structure, because school is an assemblage of machines and not a monolithic institution, its machinery is always being subverted towards decolonizing purposes. The bits of machinery that make up a decolonizing university are driven by decolonial desires, with decolonizing dreamers who are subversively part of the machinery and part machine themselves. These subversive beings wreck, scavenge, retool, and reassemble the colonizing university into decolonizing contraptions. They are scyborgs with a decolonizing desire. You might choose to be one of them. (la paperson, *A Third University is Possible*, xiii)

I never would have imagined that I would be working at a preK-12 independent school in Salt Lake City, Utah as an inaugural diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) director. In fact, I said to more than one friend that I would never become a DEI practitioner. But after decades of studying postcolonial history and literature and working within higher education to support inclusive teaching and strengthen campus cultures, I am now in the most impactful role of my career, one that allows me to translate la paperson's concept of the scyborg into the K-12 space. While this essay touches on some of the practices I use in implementing critical DEI work, it primarily focuses on the underlying value of this work, the positional complexities it entails, and the sustainable approaches that support it. As described by la paperson, "Scyborg–composed of *S+cyborg*–is a queer turn of word that I offer to you to name the structural agency of persons who have picked up colonial technologies and reassembled them to decolonizing purposes" (xiii). Operating within systems initially designed to exclude, the scyborg agitates within them towards liberation. While to many colleagues and friends, my transition into the K-12 environment seemed out of the ordinary after over a decade in higher education, in reality, it provides the perfect opportunity to enact small and large scale changes that impact the experiences of students, faculty, staff, and community members in a political context where the words diversity, equity, and inclusion have been banned from government institutions, including public schools. In other words, I am able to channel my decolonizing desire within and through the private educational institution to reassemble it into "decolonizing contraptions" that force it to be in tension with itself.

As a scholar of comparative literature, I have spent my academic life working through multimodal and multidisciplinary frameworks of thinking to assemble archives, analysis, and arguments that make new meaning in and of the world. This propensity toward working in the interstices and at the margins compels me to an educational praxis that does much of the same. For DEI practitioners, there is no specific degree to pursue, no singular pathway to take, and no one sanctioned canon that guides our collective work. Instead, the field emerged at the intersections of multiple disciplines -- history, cultural studies, literary theory, postcolonial studies, antiracist pedagogy -- into a living body of work that evolves, shifts, and grows into the shape of organizational and individual needs to create equity, inclusion, and belonging. For me, this reality means borrowing from frameworks across these disciplines and gathering data from the community I work with in order to create a nimble and flexible approach that can attend to the varied needs of individuals, from preschool learners to adults, and systems, from databases to institutional policies. Blending data, scholarship, and lived experiences allows me to integrate a human-centered lens into an educational system founded in response to rapid advances in 19th century industrial technologies, as outlined by scholars such as David B. Tyack in *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education*.

The way I approach my work as a DEI practitioner – one whose responsibilities focus on creating more equitable and inclusive learning environments for students as well as a more equitable organization writ large – is grounded in my training as a postcolonial scholar, drawing from frameworks by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, whose work outlines the ways in which colonial ideologies are insidiously embedded in systems of domination long after the removal of imperial rule; Frantz Fanon, whose analysis of race and class within systems of oppression clarifies capitalism's impulse towards subjugation; Edward Said, who offers strategies for reading against systems of control and insidious othering; and many others. It is equally informed by black radical feminists like Angela Davis, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, and Nikki Giovanni, who blend the personal and political into acts of love, resistance, and solidarity that together operate as a powerful force for social change. And, perhaps more than anything, my approach is driven by a relentless optimism that we can imagine a better world into existence through literature, the arts, and our collective love and solidarity. In this piece, I am specifically in conversation with socialist, feminist, and antiracist theoretical frameworks conceptualized by Alicia Garza, bell hooks, Tricia Hersey, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, and la paperson, who interrogate the social, political, and economic systems we have inherited and whose scholarship provides glimpses into multiple, expansive, and joyful futurisms. All of these frameworks assembled together add up to how I define radical in the context of education: as a socialist, feminist, and antiracist approach in theory and a collective and relational one in practice, one that allows me to keep fighting at the intersections of colonizing structures and their decolonizing countercultures.

How do I translate these theoretical frameworks into my work within the preK-12 context? While I am the one directing or guiding this work, it lives beyond me. It is an assemblage of conversations, ideas, and actions toward change led by me and a host of others. My role is not only about me; my job is to give people permission to propel their decolonizing desires toward agitation against the institutional structure that was designed to keep so many of us out. While some of the work is more visible, such as community programs and large-scale initiatives that are marketed through official channels, a lot of it lives right beneath the surface in the mindsets, attitudes, and

behaviors of a community, as DEI from below. My goal is to create opportunities to bring all thinkers, agitators, and troublemakers together, making the scope of the work necessarily hard to describe and quantify because it is shared and lives everywhere.

DEI from below names the reality of working within our individual spheres of influence to enact change in an intentional and consistent way. As much as DEI work requires an aspiration toward futures free of oppression, critical DEI carries within it the tension of the status quo and the possibility of liberation. Sustained momentum towards institutional change often requires the consistent questioning and interruption of the machinations of the status quo to bend it towards liberatory practices. Intercepting the status quo from where each of us is located can disrupt the colonizing structure in ways that are sanctioned by others in the institution, but the status quo is always ready to resume its role at any moment. Perhaps that is why la paperson's conceptualization of the scyborg is so appealing – because it identifies the messiness of agitating towards change within a system that is designed to maintain the status quo.

What follows is my attempt to describe what critical DEI looks like within a tuition-charging institution similar to the higher education institutions that la paperson studies. I begin with describing a DEI from below from my location within the private preK-12 context in a local landscape where DEI wars are waged in public school classrooms. I then discuss the strategies and conditions through which I labor, against frontlash –as conceptualized by Joseph Darda – and backlash, and also against capitalism in its many insidious forms, as an act of self-preservation. And finally, I examine why I stay in this work and return to it over and over again through a sense of shared purpose and radical love.

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How I Show Up, Or DEI From Below

When I talk with folks who are interested in taking up DEI work, they often ask how I got started on my journey to become the practitioner I am today. From the time I was a young child – the eldest daughter of immigrant parents – I often questioned the assumptions or expectations others had of me and my two sisters: Why couldn't I forge my own path instead of that dreamt of by others? Why couldn't I speak back to teachers whose racist ideologies impacted my relationships with friends and my idea of self? I didn't always have the language to name what I observed around me, but I knew that it didn't all add up to a feeling of liberation. I didn't feel like the me I wanted to be could exist freely within these constraints. Once I acquired the language to describe the structural realities of what being a young woman of color in this country meant, I began to realize that my work advocating for myself and others was meaningful, necessary, and impactful. Thus, when the opportunity to work with younger students and teachers arose, I recognized it as an opportunity for me to help others

navigate systems of power and privilege in empowered and liberatory ways. Or, as a way to help young people become scyborgs too as they experience their first encounters with insidious forms of oppression.

No doubt there are many individuals who think they know how to do DEI work or what is required to do it "correctly." Countless folks have, in not so many direct ways, tried to tell me how to do my job. Like them, I too used to think it was an issues-based enterprise: if only I could get people to say this instead of that, or if only people better understood this topic, then . . . What I have come to realize, however, is that it is less about how well people know the issues or topics that are often categorized under the larger umbrella of DEI work – though basic literacy is of course helpful – but more their mindset toward change, being wrong, and (re)learning. When supporting colleagues, I now offer them the gift of feedback by pointing to gaps or missteps and then asking questions about how I might be helpful in their own process of identifying steps to move through the challenge. In other words, it's harder to teach people how to adopt habits of mind that allow them to become strategic allies and changemakers, and yet, these are the very attributes necessary for this work to have long-term impact.

I have been wrong and I have seen DEI work go wrong because of a refusal to inhabit the long view. I used to think that being radical meant loudly calling out inequities and injustices when you witness them, and while I still believe that naming inequities and injustices is a necessary first step, I have come to embrace a radical approach where I show up every day to grow capacity in others to help shift their mindsets and move this work forward in collective and sustainable ways that will long outlast my relationship to the institution. I have seen the fruits of this labor already in how questions about equity and inclusion are asked in all hiring processes regardless of my presence; in how decisions about compensation and leave policies account for potential inequities; in how students feel empowered to name what is and what is not working for them through the lens of belonging. In all honesty, it is hard for me to always harness my anger toward incremental change, and yet I know that institutions like mine, established over 150 years ago, are not going to change overnight. As la paperson reminds us, this change requires persistent and collective agitation, dismantling, and rebuilding towards the kind of futures we want to imagine are possible.

To cultivate a DEI from below, one that is transformative, proactive, and collective, I work to build trusting relationships with others so that we can together identify ways to struggle for change. When I first started, I spent several months listening and getting to know the dedicated faculty, the brilliant students, the intentional parents and caregivers, the Board of Trustees, as well as members of the leadership team. Was it overwhelming? Yes. People had wildly different ideas about what my role at the school could and should be, and they also had a variety of experiences that informed their thinking about these solutions. By creating opportunities for individuals to share, rather than problems for me to "solve," I was

able to forge individual relationships with many colleagues before identifying next steps. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs asks, "What are the intergenerational and evolutionary ways that we become what we practice? How can we navigate oppressive environments with core practices that build community, resistance, and more loving ways of living?" (*Undrowned*, 43) Within my tuition and donor-based institution, much of the work we do as educators is to help students and their families understand their privileges and positionality not in ways that shame or blame them but rather that help them develop empathy when interacting with peers and community members. I work alongside a number of colleagues to help lead this work in age-appropriate ways. We don't expect elementary students, for example, to understand equity and inclusion in the same ways as high school students. In fact, we work with humans aged 3 to 80, including long-standing Board members, so the work requires translation across contexts and coalition-building in order to be effective and impactful.

Working through the same hierarchical structures that consolidate power and disenfranchise workers will not work when advocating for equitable and inclusive educational environments. As Alicia Garza claims:

> When people come together to solve problems, they do not automatically become immune to the ways society and the economy are organized. We bring the things that shape us, consciously and unconsciously, everywhere we go. Unless we are intentional about interrupting what we've learned, we will perpetuate it, even as we are working hard for a better world. (*The Purpose of Power*, 201)

Despite the fact that a shared power structure is often more unwieldy than one that has a clear "leader," cultivating a DEI from below requires a disruption of traditional governing structures. While my team consists of a few individuals who have clearly articulated roles, both part- and full-time, within my office, it also consists of about twenty other individuals who lead this work on a volunteer basis as mentors for affinity groups and learning communities, increasing the reach of our work and ability to support students, teachers, and families. Additionally, when colleagues approach me with parts of the machine that are not working inclusively, I am able to deputize them to share some of the load; if they name it, then I urge colleagues to be a part of the solution too. When a colleague expressed concerns about how his faith-based identity was not visible or accommodated within the institution, I encouraged him to lead an affinity group with students in his division as a way to begin collectively identifying their needs. While reluctant at first, he came around to stepping into this role, and it proved to be valuable not only to the students, but also to him. In this way, I have been able to work with the moveable middle, what Dolly Chugh refers to as the 60% of people who are willing to come along, to build capacity, momentum, and a collective that carries this work with each other. This approach also empowers those among the 20% who are out ahead agitating for change and acting upon their decolonizing desires, as I've seen demonstrated by a colleague who talks about identity in his physics classes or by a group of high school students who dared to create a collective space of healing and empowerment for themselves.

In addition to coalition-building and a shared sense of responsibility to cultivate a DEI from below, I work through what I refer to as inception, planting seeds to nurture over time in order for them to flourish. Part of the frontlash that DEI work often has to contend with is the false opposition between rigor and DEI – the assumption is that spending too much time talking about DEI takes away from the rigorous academic curriculum that students should be engaging with every day. In reality, we are presented constantly with the consequences of individuals, communities, and entire nations not being able to engage in productive dialogue through difference and disagreement to arrive at better solutions for the collective whole. This opposition or binary stems from the perception that educators are taking a piecemeal approach to different issues or topics related to DEI instead of helping students cultivate a strong sense of self, community, and purpose in the world. In order to combat this perception when it has shown up in our community, I recorded a short video to share with our community connecting the very human need for belonging to students' ability to learn and grow, thereby contextualizing DEI work within the preK-12 setting with citations to the research that backs up these claims. It's hard to argue with the fact that, as a school, our priority is to ensure that each and every student is able to learn deeply, and that in order to do so, they need to feel a strong sense of belonging. This tactic also helps alleviate the concern that I as a practitioner or the school as an institution has some kind of hidden activist agenda that pits individuals against each other. By working within the machinations of the institution, in other words, we are able to act as scyborgs, agitating for change in ways that are integrated within our educational mission and legible to the whole community.

While most folks who disagree with my approach or the institution's commitment to inclusion will rarely come to speak with me directly, I knew that this perception about rigor was out there and chose to proactively address it. When our students come to school, they enter into the real world of difference, tension, and challenge -- it does not exist somewhere outside of this space. Those who perceive DEI as taking away from the academic rigor promised by our institution fail to understand that in order to best prepare our students for the world in which they live, we must equip them with the tools to integrate DEI into their critical thinking frameworks. Challenging them to deeply engage with others' perspectives and develop the tools to understand their limited world view as individuals is no small feat; instead, this type of education requires rigor not only in terms of content, but also attitudes and mindsets in order to truly understand one's place and purpose in the world. Whether or not those who need to hear it the most engage with the information I share in the video mentioned, it is an attempt to help educate and support those who are not already predisposed to the type of learner stance necessary to engage with others in our community, thereby extending

the scale at which these conversations often take place (i.e., within the Boardroom or at the leadership table). All of these strategies constitute for me a DEI from below, one that operates on multiple levels and scales toward a shared goal of transformation. This approach does not come without risk; when the work is dispersed in these ways, it's sometimes hard to wrap my arms around all of it, and at the end of the day, within the system, I am the one responsible for the impact. However, I refuse to operate through the consolidated power of my position within a hierarchy because it is antithetical not only to my own values but also to the value of the work.

I took a similar approach when Utah passed anti-DEI legislation recently. Instead of making a public statement reaffirming our commitment to DEI and admonishing the government, we instead chose to continue doing the work so as not to draw undue attention to individuals within our community or to invite more targeted legislation at our efforts. As an independent school, our governing body is our Board of Trustees and we are accredited through a regional organization that provides oversight to independent schools. This status does mean that we are protected from the bills that our state legislature passes, but the rhetoric generated by anti-DEI legislators still has an impact on parent/caregiver, faculty, and student perceptions within our community as well. Often, individuals do not understand how legislation impacts our institution and the public sector differently, which means that my job has also been to read and translate these laws to make them legible to those within our community. And while I continue to have the support of the Board and Head of School in carrying on with my strategic initiatives, given the tensions within our political landscape, this support can often start to erode overnight, as it has for many colleagues who are DEI practitioners in places like Seattle, San Diego, Los Angeles, and New York. While the intersections of frontlash and backlash are a challenge, they illuminate how DEI from below – one that is transformative, proactive, and collective – is the only way forward in any institution because it lives outside and within overarching structures, enabling scyborgs to operate from within and through their decolonizing desires.

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How I Labor, Or Working Towards Abundance

You were not just born to center your entire existence on work and labor. You were born to heal, to grow, to be of service to yourself and community, to practice, to experiment, to create, to have space, to dream, and to connect. (Tricia Hersey, *Rest is Resistance*, 122)

In order to cultivate a DEI from below, how I labor is a crucial component to examine within the capitalism system we have inherited. Reading Tricia Hersey's *Rest is Resistance* felt like a balm I didn't know I needed to move through the world and my work as a DEI practitioner. Her meditative prose and simple but powerful reminders about our humanity jerked me into an awakening within the deepest recesses of my soul. Who was I laboring for? More importantly, how was I laboring? Her manifesto opened up a deep well of questions for me and continues to help me refine and center my approach.

There are countless memes circulating on the internet that depict the dichotomy between what people think others' jobs are and what they actually entail. The same is true for my role –pundits, politicians, and parents alike all hold assumptions and ideas about what any DEI practitioner's job actually is, regardless of context. Most assume we are going around calling people out for their racist language, or that we are shutting down conversations and creating situations where folks in dominant groups are shunned. While I cannot speak on behalf of other practitioners, these assumptions are a far cry from the work I do with teachers, students, and families on a daily basis. Instead, I help individuals build a positive sense of self-identity, prioritize repair when there are rifts in their relationships with peers because of harmful language or behavior, and provide countless learning opportunities about how we can build more empathic, ethical, equitable, and inclusive educational environments. Working with younger students, usually aged 3-18, means modeling for them how to learn from and grow through mistakes, because if we told them they can't come back from them, why would they keep trying?

This work happens on many time scales and levels, often requiring me to balance others' sense of urgency with what I know to be sustainable practices and needs. For example, when bias-related incidents take place, as they sometimes do because we work with humans, there is often an outsized sense of urgency to "fix" the problem because adult witnesses are often activated from their grown up sense of harm within the community. And while we must work to address the situation through intentional and restorative processes, we also need to work towards proactive and long-term strategies that help community members avoid making these mistakes in the first place. Often, we need to allow students the time to reflect and process so that they can come to a moment of repairing a relationship with a sense of sincerity; otherwise they will feel forced into an apology that lands flat. The reality is that humans will never be free of bias, and we need both short and long-term strategies to employ when it shows up. As I work with others, I often hold this tension up so that we do not lose sight of both the reactive and proactive needs within the community towards resolution.

Laboring as a DEI practitioner also often requires working with folks at their starting point, instead of our own. While in the past I was certain I knew why someone got defensive or was stuck, I now try to take a stance of curiosity so that I can engage colleagues and students with grace and from a genuine place of interest. On a personal note, to do this work means having to attend to my own trauma and experiences as a girl of color so that I can support cishet boys in the same ways I do marginalized students –and it's still a work in progress because of my natural affinity with those who share experiences similar to my own. Similarly, I have to work from where the institution is at instead of where I hope it to be. Affinity groups, for example, are an important first

step towards creating a sense of belonging and safety for so many students who have no other spaces to talk about their experiences. Over time, we have been able to establish 21 affinity groups starting in 1st grade and through 12th grade that are race-based, gender-based, ability-based, faith-based, and based in intersections of these identities as well. For so many students, these are spaces where they say they can fully be themselves and not worry about being judged unfairly by others. They come together to engage in shared learning, mutual support, community service, and more. And yet, affinity groups are a temporary solution within a dominant structure that makes some of our students feel othered. As we work towards a possible future in which these groups would not be needed because everyone would feel belonging no matter what space they are in, it would be foolish for me to nudge toward that endpoint without taking the necessary steps along the way, which means laboring slowly instead of impatiently. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs offers,

> It is the speed, the speedboats, the momentum of capitalism, the expediency of pollution that threatens the ocean, our marine mammal mentors, and our own lives. What if we could release ourselves from an internalized time clock and remember that slow is efficient, slow is effective, slow is beautiful? (*Undrowned*, 141)

One of my colleagues uses the phrase, "go slow to go fast," and it has stuck with me. It reminds me that it once took me nine months to write a polished version of my first dissertation chapter before my PhD advisor would approve it, so as impatient as I can be at times, I have practiced waiting in order to make more of an impact, and I can do so again.

Laboring more patiently also allows me to center the students in my approach. Their needs must guide the work that we do because they are the ones who are impacted by the decisions we make. I take them seriously, and I strive to role model for them how to take up space in the world and how not to tie their worth to their productivity. Tricia Hersey reminds us that:

> We are socialized into systems that cause us to conform and believe our worth is connected to how much we can produce. Our constant labor becomes a prison that allows us to be disembodied. We become easy for the systems to manipulate, disconnected from our power as divine beings and hopeless. We forget how to dream. This is how grind culture continues. We internalize the lies and in turn become agents of an unsustainable way of living. (*Rest is Resistance* 99-100)

Our young people should be allowed to dream and become dreamers; too many of them are already jaded and divested from the notion that their dreams are powerful. Often, this disposition is inherited from the grown-ups around them: if we cannot be dreamers, if we cannot imagine better futures, what messages do we send to them? So many of us are caught in the trap of grind culture, doing more to do more, doing more even if we know we should slow down and do less, doing more even when our bodies tell us that we are dying. I now try, therefore, to talk openly to students and colleagues about how I leave some things undone, that I revise my to-do list, that I punt projects to the next year because at the end of the day, my value and worth should not be measured based on what I have done or what I have accomplished, but rather by what kind of human I strive to be in the world. A scarcity mindset, derived from capitalism's death drive, leads to negative physical and mental consequences. As the formidable Audre Lorde admits when first diagnosed with cancer:

> I had to examine, in my dreams as well as in my immune-function tests, the devastating effects of overextension. Overextending myself is not stretching myself. I had to accept how difficult it is to monitor the difference….Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare. (*A Burst of Light*, 130)

Working against capitalism, as Tricia Hersey encourages through her manifesto, means working toward an abundance mindset. Despite what capitalism might have us believe, there is enough for all of us, and each of us can have value and worth and also celebrate each other's accomplishments. It also means not allowing our adult ideas about the world to diminish students' joy. When I march with our students in our annual city-sponsored Pride Parade, their joy is infectious. I could tell them about my ambivalent feelings about a parade sponsored by large corporations whose DEI frontlash often manifests as co opting movements for financial gains, but instead I choose to center myself in their joy as a revolutionary act of belonging, especially in a state where they often do not feel seen or celebrated. Cultivating a community of care instead of operating through an individualistic mindset allows us to preserve our humanity and approach others through theirs.

Modeling an abundance mindset also means not taking yourself too seriously. As I like to joke when facilitating workshops, I am both a recovering serious person and a recovering perfectionist from the decades I spent in academia under the many pressures that early career folks encounter there. Now, I instead create opportunities for play, mistakes, and risk-taking in order to live and learn joyfully alongside others. While I have always been a curious person, open to experimenting and trying out new ideas and initiatives, I would often wait for the right moment or to have it all figured out before fully going for it. Working with younger students, and being a mother to a small human, has enabled me to see the wisdom of trying, failing, and trying again openly and publicly to normalize the process of learning and growing. I have embraced opening with connection activities that I would have thought cheesy in the past, participating in improv activities, working through the design thinking process, and requiring experimentation when leading learning for colleagues and students because I have seen that the mark of a successful session is when participants return to engage in learning together again. There is a ton of unlearning required as part of DEI work in terms of the

messages and assumptions we make about others, but also in terms of expectations about labor and productivity.

The way I move through the work seeks to model both joy and self-preservation as anti-capitalist practices. While this might not look like DEI work as folks often think of it, it is critical DEI –against capitalism and exploitation, against the status quo, against the theft of our humanity. "Loving ourselves and each other," Tricia Hersey writes, "deepens our disruption of the dominant systems. They want us unwell, fearful, exhausted, and without deep self-love because you are easier to manipulate when you are distracted by what is not real or true," (*Rest is Resistance*, 118). How do I attempt to disrupt dominant systems of exploitative labor? I talk openly about my whole life, not just my work, as a way to normalize bringing my full humanity and that of others into the workplace. When someone asks me how I am doing, I don't give the quick and easy "I'm fine," but rather respond honestly and genuinely to build a connection with another human. When I am asked to take on a new project or collaborate with colleagues on theirs, I name the realities of my work schedule and push back if my calendar will not allow me to take it on. My sisters and close friends make up my "no" committee so that I guard my time intentionally and only take on projects in addition to that of my full-time job that are both value-aligned and manageable within the care practices I prioritize for myself. These practices include exercising at least 3-4 times a week, spending time outdoors alone, being present for my family, and writing at least a few times a week. Without these care practices, my body physically and mentally begins to break down, making it hard for me to continue to labor under capitalism. My self-preservation also requires laughter and time well spent with my BIPOC colleagues; we collectively create sacred time where we hold each other's worries, but more importantly where we celebrate and lift each other up so that we can continue fighting the good fight in community with one another. Within the political landscape of my state and the country, there are countless attempts to rob individuals of their humanity and joy; my approach to critical DEI stems from a deep commitment to cultivating an abundance mindset for myself and my community so that we can become more powerful agents of change.

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Why Stay? Or Radical Love

When I applied for my current job, I wrote about radical hope in my educational philosophy. I wrote that the way I approach this work stems from a sense of radical hope that we can help cultivate future leaders of this world who collaborate effectively across their differences to tackle global-scale challenges and who lead with compassion -- for themselves, for one another, and for the world we share. This deep sense of hope is tied to purposeful work, as Alicia Garza writes in *The Purpose of Power*: "Hope is not the absence of despair -- it is the ability to come back to our purpose, again and again"

(289). My purpose is to lead institutional change with integrity and in ways that are values-aligned, without which I would be equally complicit in upholding outdated and covertly discriminatory policies, ideas, and frameworks. Since that time, my commitment to radical hope has transformed into a deeper commitment to love; radical love is the only pathway to the better, more just futures we can imagine together. As a woman of color navigating predominantly white spaces for my entire education, career, and life, practicing radical love towards myself, my neighbors, and my community can prove quite challenging, but all of my research and training has taught me that without it, we will not be able to productively struggle towards the kinds of worlds so many movement makers have been dreaming up for decades. And so, I choose to claim agency as part scyborg:

> The agency of the scyborg is precisely that it is a reorganizer of institutional machinery; it subverts machinery against the master code of its makers; it rewires machinery to its own intentions. It's that elliptical gear that makes the machine work (for freedom sometimes) by helping the machine (of unfreedom) break down. (la paperson, 55)

This fight for equity and justice is long; we have been in intense political battles over belonging for as long as this country has existed, and we will be here again – it is a requirement of nationalism to draw boundaries around who belongs and who does not. I have been here before, as a younger person with less of a sense of empowered and embodied practice. Choosing how you show up as a leader matters; I am willing to have a conversation with anyone who feels courageous enough to walk through my door and into a state of vulnerability. Following Alicia Garza's guidance, I start by building a relationship around our shared humanity before addressing the issue at hand. Even though we expect and ask kids to inhabit vulnerability every day, so many educators still do not practice engaged pedagogy in the ways that bell hooks offered thirty years ago in *Teaching to Transgress*, often leaving students and adults alike without a strong sense of belonging within the classroom. In an earlier text, hooks writes about the plight of isolation and disconnection that plagues our country:

> Currently in our nation Americans of all colors feel bereft of a sense of 'belonging' to either a place or a community. Yet most people still long for community and that yearning is a place of possibility, the place where we might begin as a nation to think and dream anew about the building of beloved community. (*Belonging: A Culture of Place*, 85)

Written more than 30 years ago, this observation is no less true now than it was then. Our human need for connection across differences is a place of possibility, from which hopeful actions of solidarity can take shape. Belonging does not indicate a lack of disagreement, but rather an ability to advocate for yourself and others and make demands to meet your individual and collective needs. It was mine and my husband's desire to feel attached again to a sense of place and community that brought us to Utah, and it is the beloved community we

are trying to build anew within our school that keeps me motivated to continue, no matter the struggle, no matter the tensions, no matter the disagreement about what exactly it all looks like and adds up to.

My goal is to help both students and adults become braver versions of themselves, ones that are not afraid of differences or not knowing, but who embrace these wholeheartedly as an opportunity to learn something new about themselves, their peers, the world. As much as I can sometimes miss, with a fierce intensity, enthralling academic conversations about the meaning of words and what they add up to, there is nothing more thrilling than witnessing a young person's mind expand to more fully understand the world in which they live as well as their place within it. When high schoolers engage in deep conversation with me about how systems are connected with capitalism as the driver, I relish in their newfound sense of agency to combat its hold on their lives. When middle schoolers revise an argument in response to my (gentle but direct) feedback, I am proud of their ability to collaborate effectively toward a better claim. And when lower schoolers share with me something that is important about who they are or what they have learned, I feel grateful that they are empowered in ways I could only dream of at their age. Equipping students with the tools they need to continue asking critical questions, even if they are the only ones asking, is radical work in the deepest meaning of that word, for when all is said and done, it is the human capacity to ask deep questions of the world around us that moves us toward justice.

What if school, as we used it on a daily basis, signaled not the name of a process or institution through which we could be indoctrinated, not a structure through which social capital was grasped and policed, but something more organic, like a scale of care. What if school was the scale at which we could care for each other and move together. In my view, at this moment in history, that is really what we need to learn most urgently. (*Undrowned*, 55-56)

My practice of assembling frameworks, people, and actions together is an attempt to help build or rebuild institutions as scales of care, ones through which we can channel our decolonizing desires towards the creation of our liberated futures. That is the revolution I am after, one day at a time.

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