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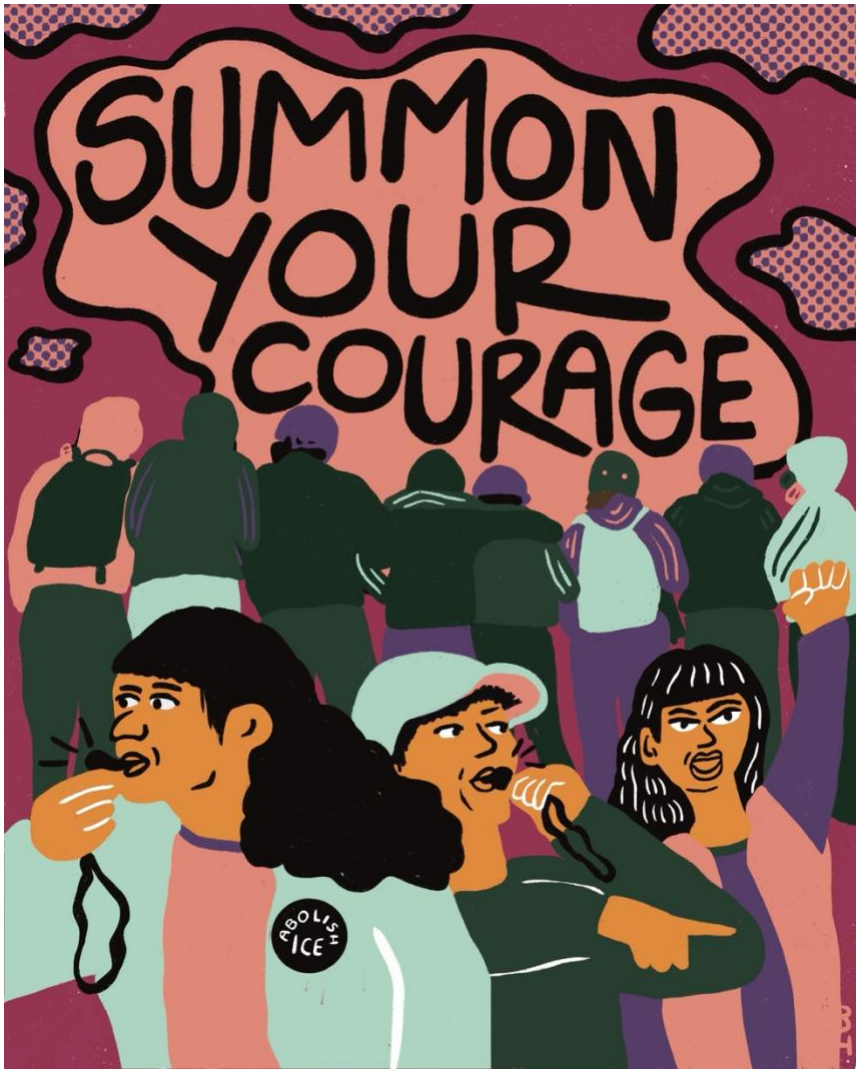
RADICAL TEACHER

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

"Screams" of Resistance: Public College Students Writing under Contemporary U.S. Authoritarianism

by Alan Aja, Joseph Entin, and Jeanne Theoharis



"SUMMON YOUR COURAGE" BY MONICA TRINIDAD 2025. JUST SEEDS OPEN ACCESS GRAPHICS COLLECTION.

Introduction

> *I hope to inspire conversations about how to change policies, but also pedagogies in the ways future educators understand and support students like us. Too often, our communities are excluded from research, or included only as subjects rather than as full participants and shapers of knowledge. I want to disrupt that cycle, even if only in small ways.*
>
> – Morena

As President Trump returned for his second term in 2025, the fierceness of his Administration's attacks on immigrants, trans people, people with disabilities, poor people, and the teaching of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian history was breathtaking. Our students at Brooklyn College, one of the most diverse colleges in the nation, were reeling; some feared even coming to school.[1] There was so much pressure to keep your head down, to not speak out and to be unseen.

And we worried. That chilling effect meant that the perspectives of our students and their communities–in particular the granular, rolling impacts this ascendant authoritarianism was having on many of our immigrant, working—class, students of color and their families–weren't widely known. And the impacts of having to keep so much inside was harming our students, whose communities were being openly demeaned, and often actively punished, by the forces that had taken political power. At the same time, economic anxiety skyrocketed among our students, as family members were deported, lost jobs, or were unable to go into work. As our students' fear rose palpably, we realized that, as educators, we are often shielded from the details of what students and their communities are facing.

It was a harrowing time, and we wanted to find a way to help them document what they were experiencing and write back against the racism, xenophobia, misogyny, and emergent fascism taking hold in Washington, DC and beyond. We had secured a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation years earlier to support student research, and we asked our grant officers if we could reapportion a small amount to conduct an autoethnography project in June 2025 and give students $1000 to participate. They said: definitely.

So in June 2025, we began an 8-week summer program with 20 students, who talked, shared experiences, researched, and ultimately wrote autoethnographies exposing the impacts of this political moment on their families and neighbors. All of the participants were students or brand—new graduates of Brooklyn College, a four-year college in the City University of New York. CUNY educates almost 250,000 students in 25 campuses across the five boroughs; Brooklyn College has about 15,000 students.

Our BC students represent a stunning panorama of global, religious, and economic diversity: roughly 100 languages are spoken on campus and our students trace their origins around the planet—from Trinidad, to Russia, to Bangladesh, to Mexico, to Nigeria, to Puerto Rico, to the US South before the Civil War. Hailing primarily from working-class families, about half of CUNY students come from households that earn $40,000 or less. Most of our students work outside of school and have abundant obligations, including caring for younger or older family members and commuting long distances between home, college, and work. Many are first in their family to attend college. They are and earnest, and do not take their education for granted. They are also incredibly smart and committed and care deeply about the world around them. To us, they are a source of continual inspiration.

The idea for using autoethnography to expose the social and political realities facing our students had its origins in an earlier project we had done. Six years ago, as the COVID-19 pandemic descended with particular ferocity on New York City and schools pivoted to remote learning, the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) offered rapid response grants to researchers studying inequality and the pandemic. Our students were suffering mightily during the early pandemic, as their families—so many of them barely scraping by under "normal" circumstances—reeled from the economic devastation wrought by the shutdown. With New York City the initial epicenter of the pandemic in the U.S., there was some acknowledgment of its disproportionate impacts on urban, working-class communities of color, but all-too-few voices from inside those communities were brought into the public conversation. We worried that a similar research problem might occur as it had after Hurricane Katrina, when the people most impacted were treated as objects of study and not included at the research table. We reached out to SSRC and asked if they would be willing to fund students writing about their communities, some of the most affected in the city. These narratives would take the form of autoethnographies—first-person accounts that incorporated research to provide historical, social, and political context. SSRC said yes.

With this invaluable support from SSRC and then funding from Brooklyn College and the Mellon Foundation, we worked with three cohorts of students in 2020 and 2021 who crafted searching, heart-breaking, and inspiring narratives about how the pandemic played out in their communities. Some of the student writings were published in 2021 in Black Perspectives, the blog of the African American Intellectual History Society. The project expanded to California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA), which is similar to CUNY in its public mission and the students it serves, where a colleague-friend Alejandra Marchevsky brought several of her students into the project. A few months later, Alma Gottlieb, a series editor at University of Pennsylvania Press, approached us about the possibility of publishing the pieces as a book. We were stunned and excited by the opportunity. The result was *Until We're Seen: Public College Students Expose the Hidden Inequalities of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024).

Five months later, Trump's second term started with a bang.[2] The new administration's violent, white supremacist, xenophobic vision of the nation and its open assault on truth-based education represented a crisis for

our students. We knew their insights were needed to have the broadest, deepest understanding of the moment's impacts on working-class immigrants, communities of color, and public college students. And so we conceived of this new autoethnography project.

Meanwhile, this repressive climate was also playing out directly on campus. As 2025 unfolded, many CUNY faculty, especially through our union, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC-CUNY), formed rapid response immigrant defense groups, and fought against the Trumpist assault on academic freedom, scholarly research, and political dissent. We watched as Brooklyn College and CUNY administrators, who claimed to want to protect our students, in fact set about enforcing key aspects of the far-Right agenda. Most horribly, they allowed a massive squad of NYPD's SRG (Strategic Response Group), a militarized anti-riot police unit created amid the Islamophobia of the War on Terror, to break up a peaceful pro-Palestine demonstration on our main quad. This terrified many in the campus community, undercutting the claims that CUNY was committed to protecting its immigrant students.[3] The summer also brought the firing of adjuncts and disciplining of full-time faculty and staff and students for participating in—or just being present during!—the demonstration.

In this volatile context, we convened twenty Brooklyn College students to meet weekly for eight weeks in June and July of 2025 to discuss, draft, research, and workshop autoethnographies documenting what was happening in their lives and the lives of their communities and the larger structural histories that surrounded them. In addition to providing the stipend, we sent each student a snack box.

We had three primary aims. First, we wanted to provide a space for community in a time so many of our students felt profoundly unsafe. Second, we wanted to construct an historical record of this harrowing moment through the eyes of our students and their families and help their voices reach a wider audience. Third, we wanted to support our students materially as they struggled financially through a difficult summer.

The collective courage they summoned created a safe space, as their tenderness towards each other broke through their fear. Students took care of each other and affirmed to each other the importance of saying things out loud. Many wrote about things they had never shared before. An extraordinary community flowered, making room for students to be vulnerable and do some of the most courageous writing we've ever seen.

The topics they pursued ranged from the heightened pressures of being undocumented to being homeless and queer in this political moment. They explored the rising fears they faced as children in mixed status immigrant families, as disabled students seeing cuts to essential services, and as pro-Palestine student activists being targeted by the CUNY administration and the larger political system. Seven of those autoethnographies were then revised over the course of the 2025-2026 academic year and are published in this special issue of *Radical Teacher.*

In early January 2026, we zoomed in for a meeting with these seven writers. As we opened the virtual meeting room, we were all too aware that the world outside was in even greater turmoil. The Trump administration had just kidnapped Venezuela's President, while escalating a dramatic surge of ICE's street level, door-to-door violence from Los Angeles to Minneapolis. One by one, the student writers underscored how the barrage of news had forced them to revisit their drafts, as things got even worse.

These essays represent a collective portrait of this contemporary moment in the United States through the eyes of working—class immigrants and communities of color. They take us beyond the numbers of people being deported, of mixed—status families being torn apart, of ICE raids and police brutality and cuts to needed services, to what those look like in the everyday lives of young people living in NYC. We are confronted in vivid detail by the pressures on them never to make a mistake, their fears for their family abounding, their voices being muzzled. (All students chose a pseudonym so they could write these pieces with more safety.)

We witness the terrors of being a child in a mixed—status family, fearing family separation as Catarina does and of unchecked law enforcement, like Mercedes encountered, arrested without warrant or explanation. Getting to research this broader pattern of law enforcement harassment against Black women was transformative, allowing Mercedes to speak about the incident for the first time. For Morena and Junior, the power of articulating the difficulties of their experiences in school as undocumented students was palpable. In these essays, we see how political differences rend Latinx families like Chichi's, through anger at relatives who supported this current regime. We are shown the almost—impossible situation international students like Iris face, as they balance their studies with their desire to call out the injustices around them. And we confront the unbearable pressure on students like Junior, Morena, and Akin who are repeatedly told to keep their heads down and be quiet.

These writings defy the silences imposed on so many vulnerable populations by an increasingly repressive federal government, where writing an op-ed can lead to an ICE abduction, as it did so dramatically for Rumeysa Ozturk. Does studying in the US in this moment make you voiceless? The contributors to this essay respond with a resounding no! Together, these students refuse to be invisibilized and dare to think larger, to dream, even, as one of our student writers beautifully underscores, to scream! While each person worked individually, they were also writing in collaboration, alongside a group of others. They were not alone with their thoughts and struggles, and this helped provide the courage for them to write with such conviction and power and to pursue the research to undergird their stories.

Over and over, these students write about how they have played by the rules and done what they are supposed to, and it doesn't matter. They talk about the burden of always having to be good, to work harder and harder and harder to even just stand still. They show the level of daily fear, waking up in the middle of the night terrified that

family members will be stolen, worried that going to a Palestine demonstration on campus might cost them their place at the college or even in the United States.

These pieces also lay out a particular set of challenges for educators. Perhaps most importantly, they call on us as educators to step up. Students worry about who they can trust, and how educators don't always understand the stakes. Their writing reveals the responsibility on us as educators–not on them–to learn the many ways this repression is playing out and take steps to demonstrate it. We need to think creatively about how to name the horrors, to provide real assistance and affirming spaces, and to work to make sure that they don't lower their aspirations in the face of this terror.

Too many educators in this moment, understandably gutted by this terrifying political situation, are feeling paralyzed by fear or worry or despair: "What will work?" "What can I do?" It's easy to get tunnel vision; understanding the need to keep ICE off campus, we don't always recognize that this is just one of many things students need. These writings identify a few intersecting themes for radical educators.

First is the need for us as educators to learn and highlight the kinds of pressures students and their families are facing. It is not on our students to come forward in the midst of such widespread, politically authorized fear; we need to name it. By being reluctant to speak about things, educators risk normalizing the structures and narratives bearing down on students that stress personal responsibility and silence. Besieged by messages to be resilient, students often feel they need to figure it out on their own. This sends the inadvertent message to blame themselves when the pressure gets too much, rather than seeking out collective care and justice. As educators, we need to create the space to say this is horrible, it shouldn't be happening, what do you need? Or we risk leaving students to negotiate things on their own.

As educators understandably nervous about prying, we often don't realize the power of identifying the terrors of this political moment in class and in other educational spaces—of naming the specifics of ICE rampaging throughout the country, of TPS ending, of massive cuts to social services. Foregrounding the range of devastating consequences occurring for many students and their loved ones does not mean asking students to disclose what's happening to them personally. And this is crucial whether we're teaching German history, African American literature, health, or physics. In addition, affirming that it's okay to be human and make mistakes, we need to stress to students the undue pressure of having to be endlessly 'resilient.' Resiliency is not justice; it's not the measure of your worth; it's what you are driven to when injustice abounds. Over and over, students said they were exhausted. Naming that exhaustion, affirming that they shouldn't have to feel that way, gives students permission to take the time they need and share some of what they are experiencing, if they know they have someone to help.

Second is to continually remind students about the larger structures impacting their lives and to help them learn and research these. By connecting the personal to the structural (via autoethnography or other modes), educators can push against the pressure young people are feeling to make themselves small and the self-blame that this moment engenders. Assignments that help students research these larger histories and contexts can be powerful–both in the research skills they teach and in the ways students can see their own situations embedded in larger structural contexts.

Students need affirmation of their capacities as thinkers and researchers. At a time when they are being told to be "good" and play by the rules our society has set—or to cede their research capacities to AI—our job is to find ways to tell them to play big and push against the pressures on them to shrink. They have the insight and capability to lead us forward–but it's imperative to articulate the ways we will support them in pushing forward. As educators, our role is crucial in affirming students' sense of their own possibility—especially working—class, poor, and first-generation students growing up in a society that often devalues their own thinking and power. We need to be clear how wrong those messages are and affirm continually to students that dreaming big is both what they are entitled to and what leads to the possible, the material, the actual. That means offering to write letters of recommendation even before they might ask, looking for opportunities (scholarships, internships) for them to apply to. It means creating resource sheets, identifying both university and community programs and legal resources, and figuring out ways to have food around.

Third, faculty and educators need to listen–to hold space for our students, even if we don't have answers. Used to being the ones who know things, educators often find this hard. We need to let students know not only that we're in solidarity politically, but also that we're here to learn and understand where they're coming from–because it is our job to help them and we want to learn how to support them better. Reminding them that they don't need to suffer in silence can have a profound impact.

Finally, as educators, we need to struggle within, outside, and even with our own institutions. This can range from continually informing students about avenues for emergency financial, counseling, or other supports on campus, to calling nonprofits or government agencies by their side to access legal help or social services. It means using our privileges as faculty to help navigate bureaucratic hurdles. And it also requires holding administrators and fellow faculty accountable when the institution presents barriers to their potential. It's our job as educators to advocate, agitate, and maneuver for and with students (especially working-class, immigrant, and first-generation students) through the roadblocks designed to deter and disempower them.

Undoubtedly, this recommendation involves potential risk. Just as our students are disciplined, just as immigrant communities are harassed and deported, such punishment can also extend to others, including faculty, who push too hard on their behalf. We need to recognize that, but also

not be paralyzed by it. Our responsibility as educators demands that courageous persistence.

And of course it cannot be done alone. The three of us have leaned on each other, on our colleagues in the union and on comrade-educators in other contexts who share similar commitments to our students. Intellectual work is never done in isolation, and in terrifying times like these, creating spaces of solidarity and mutual support for students and for faculty to do the hard work of thinking and writing against the grain is more vital than ever.

We hope these pieces will inspire you and your students, too, and so we hope you will teach them. By documenting the experiences that so many immigrant, international, and working-class students are facing, these seven pieces offer powerful and provocative grounds for classroom discussion and models for your own students' writing and research. We have found autoethnography a powerful format. It is a great way to teach writing, and it invites students to connect their own experiences to larger social, historical, and political forces, to see the importance of their voice and perspective, and to unpack and research the larger contexts in which their own experiences unfold. Autoethnography works against the individualization and self-blame that students are often taught. So we encourage you to consider how these could fit into your own teaching.

After Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rican scholars and educators took up the idea of coraje, or productive rage (in Spanish, it can simultaneously mean rage and courage), articulated by interdisciplinary scholar Marisol LeBrón.[4] The pieces in this issue of *Radical Teacher* were written in a similar rage—a rage channeled into research and speech. Educators are often uncomfortable with rage. At times paralyzing and immobilizing, rage can interfere with thinking and be destructive. But it also can be generative. By disrupting the silence, rage can also point to something terribly amiss. A starting point to disrupt fear and move towards social critique, rage can underscore an awareness that something is horribly wrong and mark the urgency to address it. As radical teachers, using our own rage can be productive. We need to hear and respond to Akin's scream!

Notes

1. This is via the most recent rankings by U.S. News & World Report (which have also reported that Brooklyn College remains the most ethnically diverse for 7 straight years). https://www.brooklyn.edu/bc-news/u-s-news-world-report-again-ranks-brooklyn-college-among-best-colleges-2/

2. CUNY, like many other public universities, has faced years of austerity via inadequate local, state, and federal level funding. This long-term disinvestment means that students encounter (if not expect!) daily infrastructural challenges while conducting their studies, including deferred maintenance on necessary repairs; non-working elevators, bathrooms, and water fountains; limited hours for administrative, library, and support service offices; and other challenges more well-resourced universities often don't face. Thus, the Trump administration's renewed threats to higher education—the cuts to research and institutional funding, the threats to academic freedom, the denigration of higher education itself—have arguably heightened the consequences for already vulnerable students in the "CUNYs" around the country.

3. This occurred only a few weeks after the SRG also violently disrupted a student-led, pro-Palestinian encampment at City College (CUNY).

4. For more, see Marisol LeBrón, "Policing Coraje in the Colony: Toward a Decolonial Feminist Politics of Rage in Puerto Rico," *Signs: Journal of Women and Society* 46.4 (Summer 2021). This piece beautifully underscores how coraje was channeled by the Puerto Rican people in the aftermath of hurricane Maria through solidarity networks and refusal to accept the status quo of government neglect and repression.

Alan Aja has been teaching at Brooklyn College since 2005. His research focuses on stratification economics, urban policy, and social movements. His latest work includes an entry in *Until We're Seen* (Theoharis and Entin, eds., U. Penn Press, 2023), the book *Afro-Latinos in the U.S. Economy* (with Michelle Holder, Lexington Books, 2021) and "Global Stratification Economics: A Primer," with Mary J. López and Anita Pena, for *The Economics of Race and Stratification* (Logan, ed., University of Chicago Press, forthcoming in 2027).

Joseph Entin is Professor of English and American Studies at Brooklyn College. His latest books include *Living Labor: Fiction, Film and Precarious Work* (2023) and, co-edited with Jeanne Theoharis, *Until We're Seen: Public College Students Expose the Hidden Inequalities of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (2024). He is a member of the *Radical Teacher* editorial board.

Jeanne Theoharis is Distinguished Professor of Political Science and History at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center. Her books include *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks, King of the North: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Life of Struggle Outside the South*, and co-edited with Joseph Entin, *Until We're Seen: Public College Students Expose the Hidden Inequalities of the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

Together, Aja, Entin, and Theoharis co-founded and co-direct the Brooklyn College Mellon Transfer Student Research Program.

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