

RADICAL TEACHER

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

Introduction: Teaching and Resistance in the Time of Trumpism

by Sarah Chinn and Joseph Entin



DEMONSTRATION IN LOS ANGELES, CA | NOVEMBER 2017. PHOTO BY ALEX RADELICH

The 2016 election of Donald Trump did not bring with it anything that sounded new, but it did turn the volume knob all the way up. As part of a backlash against the measured neoliberalism of the Obama era, Trumpism has been defined by an emboldened white supremacy; brazen sexism; a belligerent foreign policy posture; an ever-more punitive stance on “law and order”; openly racist, xenophobic immigration and border policies; the denial of scientifically-proven climate change; a hypertrophied “business” approach to social problems; an assault on truth in favor of “alternative facts” and outright lies; the elevation of hate and bigotry in public discourse and attitude; and more. Most recently, it has resulted in outright cruelty, as children -- from babies to teenagers -- have been forcibly removed from their families as they cross the US border. While many liberals were shocked by the election results, radicals were hardly surprised by the Alt-Right, authoritarian forces, and sharply regressive ideas that carried Trump into office. Those forces and ideas have deep historic roots and broad support.

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Trump’s strategy, if one can call it that, has been to staff cabinet posts with barely competent, if not actually corrupt, business and military figures who have in the past been openly opposed to the mandate of that office (for example, Scott Pruitt in the EPA, Nikki Haley at the UN, Ben Carson at HUD). In education, the Trump administration has doubled down on the trend towards neoliberal, market-based, anti-public school policies that have been gaining momentum in recent decades. His education secretary, Betsy DeVos, is well versed in the privatization of public agencies: a billionaire who never attended a public school, she is the sister of the founder of Blackwater, the shadowy security firm that has served as a private extension of the US military in strategic locations around the world. No wonder she has proposed devastating funding cuts (\$7.1 Billion, over 10% of the DOE budget, in 2019) to the very agency she runs. Such cuts would be accompanied by an infusion of federal money to support school “choice” vouchers for students to leave public schools for charters and private institutions. In higher education, DeVos has supported loan policies that smooth the way for the ongoing scandal of for-profit colleges which, as even as liberal-centrist an organ as *The New York Times* editorial board has argued, “has saddled working-class students with crushing debt while providing useless degrees, or no degrees at all.”¹ As the Center for American Progress puts it: “Trump and DeVos have made their priorities clear: Starve public schools to fund private school schemes that benefit the wealthy.”²

Given the dramatic ramping up of social inequity, political Know-Nothing-ism, and intensifying persecution of undocumented immigrants, it did not take long for *Radical*

Teacher to determine that we needed an issue that would address how these changes are affecting, and being resisted in, education. But our goals and methods were still inchoate. In devising this issue, we debated whether or not to use #45’s name in framing the contemporary moment. Moreover, we asked ourselves, how much of a rupture does Trump’s election represent? Do we want to put stress on the break his proto-fascist policies represent, or emphasize the continuities with long-standing traditions in US social and political culture? What is at stake in referring to the present conjuncture as the “Age of Trumpism”? There was disagreement on the editorial board of *RT* about the right approach to this urgent topic and how we should identify the kinds of work we were looking for. Fellow board member Richard Ohmann raised two objections to the overarching rubric of “Trumpism”:

First, I take the dynamics of this period to be largely results of the neoliberal plot against America and democracy, launched by wealthy right-wingers 50 years ago (when Trump was just the worst college student in the history of the Wharton School, according to one of his professors). From that point of view, although the Republican president they got is what they deserved, he wasn’t their chosen leader, and his clownish ways are not what they wanted. So I think “age of Trumpism” embodies an interpretation of history that should be critically questioned, in radical teaching.

Second, Trump(ism) can be too easy and tempting a diversion for both students and teachers. The guy’s wacky wickedness tends to sop up everyone’s attention, as the media have shown.

We agree with the cautionary note Ohmann sounds, but also want to signal that Trump’s election *does* represent something new, or at least a newly dramatic intensification: a heightening of the reactionary rhetoric and policies against vulnerable populations and social justice movements. This rhetoric and these politics have been increasingly hegemonic under post-1970 neoliberalism, and in fact have always been integral to the US as a racist, capitalist, sexist, settler-colonial society. To put it bluntly, Trump is a symptom rather than a cause. Yet we think it is important to honor the new, justifiable fears raised by Trump’s openly racist campaign as well as his near-total absence of concern about media and public critique—his disparagement of immigrants from “shithole countries”; the equivalence he drew between white supremacist violence and non-violent anti-racist protestors in Charlottesville, VA in August 2017; his avowedly Islamophobic remarks and immigration bans; his xenophobic description, proclaimed during the news conference announcing his run for the presidency, of Mexican immigrants as “criminals and rapists”; his termination of DACA and suspension of Temporary Protected Status for many Central Americans; the anti-LGBTQ and especially anti-transgender policies and administrators he has brought to Washington³; his characterization of the mainstream media as “enemies of the people”; his denial of the human causes of global warming and undermining of federal climate change policy via the appointment of Scott Pruitt to head the EPA; his

rupture of the *données* of foreign policy and diplomacy, to name only some.

There's certainly nothing new about racism, which has been woven into the deepest and most pervasive structures of US culture even before the official founding of the nation. Yet for those persons and communities targeted by Trump's rhetoric and policies—many of whom are students in our schools—these are especially frightening times. We use the term "Trumpism," rather than Trump, to de-emphasize the President himself, while acknowledging the particular, and to some extent unprecedented, alliance of forces that have coalesced around his campaign and his administration to craft deeply regressive and authoritarian policy initiatives. A radical analysis entails going to the root to understand the deep, historical and political structures that shape a particular moment, and our understanding of Trump's rise and power requires such systemic, long-term thinking. At the same time, the ascendance of the Trump administration, and the policies and attitudes that it is advancing, represent, as Noam Chomsky puts it bluntly, "a disaster" with its own particular contours.⁴

So this is the balance we and the authors in this issue have tried to maintain: while much in this political moment is new, the continuities are crucial to acknowledge and understand. On several fronts, Trump is merely continuing policy directions set by the Obama administration, and indeed all the US presidents since at least Nixon, who have largely advanced a market-based, neoliberal agenda -- from specific visas for "high value" migrants, to the development of an "invisible" undocumented workforce in the service industry, to social problems exacerbated by defunded public education and the racial economics of mass incarceration. Trump may have declared his intention to build a border wall between the US and Mexico, but Obama's border policy was itself draconian: as "deporter in chief," he expelled over 2 million immigrants. While Trump sounds a muscular foreign policy tone, Obama sent 10 times as many military drones around the world as George Bush.⁵ While Trump celebrates economic competition, and the amassing of wealth in the hands of a few, George W. Bush bailed out the banks in the wake of the 2008 recession and Obama continued that policy, without jailing a single executive, and did virtually nothing to close the racial wealth gap, or roll back the nation's astounding economic inequality, which was as severe at the end of his term as it ever had been. Trump may have taken the unprecedented step of moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, but the move is merely an extension of the unwaveringly pro-Israel, anti-Palestinian stance that all recent administrations have held in lockstep. DeVos may be an especially egregious head of the DOE, but the cynical rationale behind her approach is of a piece with the competitive, market-derived model of education funding of Arne Duncan's Obama-era "Race to the Top" and the Bush-era focus on testing and "accountability" in "No Child Left Behind."

For many people, including the electoral majority who voted against Trump and those who are targeted by Trumpism, these are dark, distressing times. And yet, resistance to authoritarianism, misogyny, and racism has flourished—from Black Lives Matter and NoDAPL to the

2017 Women's March on Washington (and affiliate marches around the country and the world) and nationwide demonstrations against the new administration's bigoted immigration restrictions, among others. Left educators at all levels are active in the struggle, and have created networks to share pedagogical and activist strategies (see for instance: <http://www.radicalteacher.net/trumpism/>).

On the education front, 2018 has witnessed dramatic push back against austerity politics from public school teachers, who conducted massive (in some cases wildcat) strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, and Kentucky. To observers outside (and perhaps even inside) those states, the eruption of collective action, in the form of mass work stoppages, was surprising, but it represents a rational response to years of cuts to public education, and the "right to work" conditions that prevent teachers from bargaining collectively. Oppression breeds resistance, and the punishing cuts implemented under the veil of economic austerity in recent years have generated righteous anger and a desire to fight among school teachers in these notably Red states.

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As the essays in this issue indicate so powerfully, educators' resistance to Trumpism, and to the much longer histories of injustice, inequality, racism, and anti-student policies, is also taking a wide range of forms beyond the picket lines. Many of our authors chronicle their own experiences in making classrooms spaces for students to articulate the effects of the current political moment on them, and to imagine creative responses. Jesse Schwartz finds in his composition classroom at LaGuardia Community College -- one of the most ethnically and racially mixed educational institutions in the country -- students whose lived experiences of undocumented immigration, police harassment, and collective action give them the raw materials with which to craft their writing. To help his students channel their post-election feelings of anxiety and rage into action, Schwartz designed an assignment that asked students to link the critical writing and thinking they were doing to forms of activist engagement outside the classroom. Similarly, Emily Price and Susan Jurow discuss how they helped the primarily Mexican-American children in an after school program use play to express their fears about, and ways of coping with, the 2016 election and its aftermath. They show us that, if given the space, kids engage in play to both act out and find possible solutions to a political environment in which they have no power.

The precarious, volatile political climate has also required new and imaginative modes of addressing pedagogy itself. Alexandra Juhasz and Clelia Rodriguez both took familiar genres -- the syllabus and the literacy

primer -- and remade them to serve our current moment. Rodriguez's "#shitholes syllabus" both imitates the generic college syllabus and echoes the phenomenon of online aggregated syllabi that formed around specific issues connected to the histories of racial violence in the United States (most notably the #Charlestonsyllabus after the 2015 murder of nine parishioners of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church by a white supremacist and the #Fergusonsyllabus, which contextualized the murder of an unarmed black teenager by a police officer and the subsequent protests in Ferguson, MO in 2014). At the same time, it does not select readings or lay out a schedule of classes. Rather, Rodriguez offers her readers a lyrical meditation on race and racialization, and resists the normalization of white supremacy. Juhasz reimagines a media literacy primer through poetry, images, and a parliamentary-style "resolution" to offer a variety of avenues teachers and students can take to counter the ultimate Trumpian formulation: fake news. She traces the long history of mis- and dis-information from both government and media and introduces her readers to "#hardtruths," locating poetry as a possible site of real truth-telling. Working within a very different educational context--a charter high school in Chicago--DJ Cashmere describes his efforts to design and teach a course in liberatory cultural studies to tenth graders. Aiming to move beyond a liberal, white-teacher-as-savior model, Cashmere and his co-teacher developed a unit on social biography, in which the Black and Latinx students researched and narrated the challenges and successes of their lives in political context. The class culminated with a community sharing night, where students presented their stories to their families and each another, forging an environment of solidarity and collective struggle.

A number of the articles here describe the challenges of educating students who are unaware of or possibly hostile to the histories that made Trump's election possible, as well as having to negotiate timid administrators and conservative environments. Travis Boyce does the difficult work of showing his University of North Colorado students the interconnections between the anti-black racism that hovered barely under the surface of the campus and the regional embrace of the Confederacy and the myth of the Lost Cause. Ultimately, he argues, it is impossible to separate what he calls "the collegiate idea" from the history of Confederate sympathizing, given how deeply rooted college institutions such as fraternities and sports teams have been in perpetuating the romance of the antebellum South. Bill Beutel describes his efforts to engage his middle school students in civic action and political self-examination in the context of a school board and administration that keep a close eye on any pedagogical content deemed too radical (such as teaching the histories of Christianity and Islam in similar ways). To give his students a context to think about current political events, he constructed a civics class that assigned students the task of comparing the United States of 2018 with the Roman empire -- its foreign policy, political structures, and social hierarchies. Through this scheme, he made space for critique that was student-generated and inquiry based. Erika Kitzmiller designed a graduate education course that asked the mostly white, middle-class teachers-in-training

in her classroom to investigate the long history of white supremacy that paved the way for Trump's election. Inspired by the collectively formulated Trump 2.0 syllabus published on the *Public Books* website, Kitzmiller's course, structured by a range of intersectional topics connecting race, sexuality, housing, citizenship and capitalism in the US, was designed to counter the silence and evasiveness around the history of structural racism that continues to prevail in most public schools. Tristan Josephson's essay describes teaching conservative students in women's and gender studies classes who have mobilized the discourse of college as a "safe space" to ward off potential challenges to what Josephson calls "Trump feminism." Realizing that it was productive neither to put conservative students on the defensive nor to let their use of a rhetoric of victimhood slide, Josephson developed creative modes of pedagogical engagement that asked students to grapple with the material power differentials that shape identity and politics.

On some campuses, faculty and students worked together to come up with strategies of resistance. Ann Cahill and Tom Mould had the full support of their institution's administration and the enthusiastic participation of students and faculty to run a new one-credit course they called "Refusing to Wait: Intellectual and Practical Resources for Troubling Times." Their article explores the achievements of this exciting collaborative project, and also its challenges. While they were successful in putting together an innovative syllabus, and discussions were lively, they had more trouble marshalling their collective political energies for concrete action, even though that was an explicit element of the course. Their essay shows us that the gap between theory and praxis is a difficult one to bridge, even in the comparatively contained environment of the college classroom. And as Audrey Fisch's essay demonstrates, sometimes the theory can be elusive as well. She describes an exercise she used with first-year composition students in which she framed and then reframed a video clip and the responses it elicited in social media to illustrate how thin the line between news sources, social media, and "fake news" can be for some students, whose primary source of news can often be their social media feeds. But rather than simply condemning college-age students for their naiveté or apathy -- a common strategy in political and media circles -- Fisch introduced her students to various modes of media critique and information literacy. At the same time, even a consciously crafted exercise in media savvy could, she feared, "further my students' distrust of the media and not in a healthy or productive way." Just as Cahill's and Mould's students struggled to make connections between theorizing political resistance and actualizing it, Fisch's students had to work hard to sort out which media were worth believing even as they engaged in critique.

Hannah Ashley and Katie Solic stepped outside the classroom in order to make those connections. In their essay, they describe the process of using an institutional emphasis on urban education to create an insurgent, collaborative project, the Rustin Urban Community Change Axis, or RUCCAS. Bringing together students, faculty, staff and community organization leaders, RUCCAS aims not merely to teach, but also to build local grassroots power for

racial and economic justice. RUCCAS is housed in a university, but clearly exceeds academic boundaries as a hub and incubator for urban change-makers that links students with an array of community groups through organizing and participatory action projects. Ashley and Solic discuss substantial challenges, but also offer a powerful model for democratic educational counter-institution building. Working within a more conventional educational setting--a college art classroom--Heath Schultz describes his efforts to help a diverse group of Texas public university students confront their feelings of helplessness and despair in the wake of the 2016 election and challenge racist ideologies circulating in public visual culture. Schultz and his students researched the long history of imperial policing and surveillance of the US-Mexico border, as well as radical responses to it by artists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Teresa Fernández, Margarita Cabrera and others. To conclude the semester, Schultz's students created their own collective artistic response to the current moment: a sculptural anti-border-wall which they installed in the college's art building, and which asked viewers to think critically about the racist cultural and social implications of US immigration policies.

Even as we write this introduction, the political and pedagogical climate that this issue's authors are trying to negotiate, resist, grapple with, and teach within is changing rapidly -- and not for the better. In the final couple of weeks of editing, the world seemed to flip over several times. Trump's repudiation of familiar allies in favor of cuddling up to North Korea; the administration's open embrace then unconvincing denials and finally smug retraction of the racist and inhumane policy of separating parents and children at the southern US border; the Supreme Court's decision to uphold the ban on visitors from several Muslim-majority countries; and the ongoing characterization of Latin American immigrants as an infestation: it is hard not to imagine that the worst is yet to come or even predict a deeper slide into authoritarianism

or even crypto (or not so crypto) fascism. These articles provide us with lesson plans in resistance, plans we will sorely need as we move into an uncertain future.

Notes

¹ New York Times Editorial Board, "Predatory Colleges, Freed to Fleece Students," *The New York Times*, May 22, 2018:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/22/opinion/predatory-colleges-students-devos.html>

² Stephenie Johnson, Neil Campbell, and Scott Sargrad, "Trump and DeVos Continue to Undermine Public Education with Their Proposed Fiscal Year 2019 Budget," *Center for American Progress*, February 12, 2018. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/news/2018/02/12/446423/trump-devos-continue-undermine-public-education-proposed-fiscal-year-2019-budget/>

³ The National Center for Transgender Equality describes Trump as "the most anti-transgender President in American history." For details, see: <https://transequality.org/the-discrimination-administration>

⁴ For Chomsky on Trump as a "disaster" on the environment, military spending, immigration and more, see: <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/44261-a-complete-disaster-noam-chomsky-on-trump-and-the-future-of-us-politic>

⁵ Jessica Purkiss and Jack Searle, "Obama's Covert Drone War in Numbers: Ten Times More Strikes than Bush," *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, January 1, 2017: <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-01-17/obamas-covert-drone-war-in-numbers-ten-times-more-strikes-than-bush>



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