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## What Struggle Teaches: The Pedagogy of Resistance and Community

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# INTRODUCTION

## What Struggle Teaches: The Pedagogy of Resistance and Community

In *A Litany for Survival*, poet Audre Lorde writes for those “learning to be afraid with our mother’s milk.” While these early lessons are bitter and silencing, Lorde reminds her readers, who were “never meant to survive,” that it is “better to speak/remembering.” Despite potentially lethal consequences, those of us “who live at the shoreline” and who “love in doorways coming and going in the hours between dawn” still fiercely seek “a now that can breed futures.” In her short, powerful paean to memory and telling, fear and struggle, Lorde describes and demonstrates the necessity of teaching communities of resistance, and of remembering and learning principled defiance. In our current political moment, as we again bear witness to the truths of our suffering and struggle, we must also remember, and learn and teach, that survival is key to collective resistance and is our only pathway.

Take one example, a snapshot among many: In 2015, activists in Chicago came close to shutting down Black Friday shopping in the luxury-class Gold Coast neighborhood. In our efforts to gain justice for Laquan McDonald, an unarmed seventeen-year-old Black youth who was brutally murdered in the street by a police officer in October 2014, we caused a 50 percent dip in sales, with our chanting, blocking store entrances with our bodies, sitting in the icy November streets, and demanding that Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and District Attorney Anita Alvarez resign, and Chief of Police Gary McCarthy lose his job. Putting pressure on the business quarter was a powerful lever: After more than a year of protest, a majority of city residents believed the mayor should resign (Madhani); the chief of police was fired; and Alvarez was voted out of office. It took another ten months for charges to be filed against McDonald’s killer. Yet the community created by and through this struggle remains active, linked in purpose and, as we write in November 2016, poised to shut down post-Thanksgiving shopping for a second year.

**WE can't afford TRUMP's White Supremacy!**  
**\$HUT DOWN BLACK FRIDAY**  
**NO access to Big Business**

**November 25, 2016**

Figure 1 Black Friday banners by Marc Fischer (<http://temporaryservices.org>).

It's especially important to look back at these incremental successes now because we have reached another hard juncture in the "afterlife" of US slavery, as Saidiya Hartman terms it. White supremacy was not dismantled, neither by the abolition of slavery nor the election of Obama, and this political moment, like many before, is part of a wide and long history of violence against people of color, women, and too many others.

We write just after the disaster of our presidential election, and are struck perhaps less by the results than by the fallout. The mainstream media expressed surprise that 42 percent of all women voted for Trump—how could women vote for the self-proclaimed "pussy grabber"? But, *women* didn't create the president-elect, financially comfortable white women did: 53% of white women voted for Trump, and the median income of his supporters was \$70,000 (Roberts and Ely), while 94 percent of Black women did not vote for Trump (Rogers). Approximately 45 percent of the total population couldn't muster it up to vote for any candidate (Taylor). The results of the election remind us of what some women have known for centuries—from Sojourner Truth to Sylvia Ray Rivera. (Truth's "Ain't I a Woman" speech at the 1851 Women's Convention demanded that liberation for Black people be a central plank of the women's suffrage movement. Rivera, a transgender Latina and activist who was one of the founding members of the 1960s-era Gay Liberation Front, worked for decades to ensure social movements, including gay and lesbian organizing, did not erase transgender folks, sex workers, and people of color.) There is no one or given "community" of women.

The aftermath of this election uncovered more than the fiction of women's uniformity or unanimity. American identity, always a loosely woven cloth, continues to fray. Muslim communities anticipate a police registry, immigration bans, and increased surveillance. The young folks who benefited from President Obama's executive action that provided a temporary shield against deportation, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), alongside innumerable other migrants, organize and anxiously await learning whether they or their families will be rounded up and deported. The hopeful moments of criminal justice reform from the last few years—including the possibility of sentencing measures aimed at

reducing our prison population, the world's largest—seem to be fading as Trump names one, then another and another nominee for his cabinet, each scarier than the last. Key civil rights and powerful institutions that oxygenate our democracy and that had appeared to eke out a stay of execution with the death of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia—including collective bargaining, public education, and reproductive rights—are again targeted for extinction. At the same time, hope that we might soon regain what has been lost in recent years, including the Voting Rights Act, overturned by the Roberts court in 2013, is also dimming. Nations beyond US borders wait, anxiously, wondering what is on the horizon: More drone attacks? New trade embargos? Stronger borders and higher walls?

While all quarters are experiencing the changes and stresses of the aftershocks, the most violent places directly after the election for many of us are educational spaces. K–12 and post-secondary classrooms and campuses report an “uptick of violence” after the election, specifically targeting the same communities that were ridiculed and humiliated by the president-elect during the campaign (Evans). Teenage boys tear off hijabs worn by Muslim women; white teachers taunt elementary school Latino students that they will be deported; students shout “white power” in high school hallways; Black freshmen at the University of Pennsylvania receive hateful texts that include threats of lynching (Evans; Weill; Dickerson). Libraries, and “their books and patrons” have also reported a post-election “sudden increase” in “hate crimes”—including the defacing of books related to Islam and the Quran—“offenses they had rarely seen before” (Mele). And these are only a few of the instances made visible.

It is unsurprising that schools—from kindergarten classes to doctoral programs—are key sites for these struggles. As one of the few common, public, and collective institutions, educational spaces are where community is defined through daily practice. In this issue, Agatha Beins illustrates the importance of this everydayness—particularly the power of informal “small talk” in her Feminist/Womanist Theories course—and how online learning can facilitate, and constrain, these politically valuable interpersonal openings in her article “Small Talk and Chit Chat: Using Informal Communication to Build a Learning Community Online.” Of course, educational sites are also actively contested ground. There are still vigorous battles to desegregate schools and advocate for feminist and queer positive comprehensive sex education, for example across the US in K–12 schools and on college campuses. How to teach contested curriculum to upper level college students is taken up by Margaret Simon, in “Collective Reading and Communities of Practice: Teaching Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*,” which engages the layered pedagogical possibilities provided by this autobiographical graphic novel that has been banned and challenged in a number of jurisdictions for its queer content. Teachers’ unions, some of the last large (and feminized) public sector unions in the US, are under attack and continue to rally, but how long can they resist the erosions to their numbers caused by charter schools, voucher systems, and other anti-union education systems?

Figure 2 "Art teachers' demands." Photo credit Therese Quinn, Chicago Teachers Union Strike, 2012.



However, although conflict is central to the histories of educational spaces, these spaces also harbor possibility: Supporting the higher education of 2.2 million veterans, beginning in the 1940s, the GI Bill expanded the (mostly white) US middle class (Mettler; Munsey). The establishment of ethnic and women's studies programs on university campuses in the 1970s and '80s interrupted racist and hetero-patriarchal business as usual and created learning and teaching possibilities for many people of color and white women. In 2016, the National Labor Relations Board affirmed that graduate students at private universities were workers and could unionize, spurring organizing at Columbia University, Harvard, and other campuses (Oppenheimer). We, Meiners and Quinn, started Teachers Against Militarized Education (TAME) almost a decade ago, to build on the work of communities and young people to focus attention on the Chicago



Figure 3 *Teachers Against Militarized Education (TAME)*. Art by Eric Triantifillou, 2008.

Public Schools' partnerships with the Department of Defense. The partnership had resulted in a proliferation of public military schools and programs in Black and Brown neighborhoods—at that time, Chicago was the only city in the nation with public secondary academies representing all branches of the military (Quinn and Meiners). Instructors such as Sarah Hentges who incorporates social media to support her students in directly engaging in feminist social movements and critically analyze their own pedagogy in “Toward #SocialJustice: Creating Social Media Community in Live and Online Classrooms.” And fifth graders in California recently successfully organized to require the history of the deportation of Mexican workers to be included in California’s elementary school curricula (Cupchoy). These are just a few examples and moments where education spaces have been imagined, pushed, and pulled into forms that more fully support thriving lives and just futures.

For us, the core theme of this moment as well as this issue is community, which is always, simultaneously, a radical vision, a fugitive and thriving possibility, a struggle, and a failure. This tension—the imperative and the problem of community—are starkly visible now. For example, in the first days after the election, social media users explored the definitions and limits of “family” and “friend” in articles and posts across multiple mediums about how to make it through holiday dinners without fighting, and announcements about who would be blocked, “unfriended,” or “unfollowed.” As some actual and imagined communities fractured, others were formed: new groups sprang up on Facebook and debated who else should be added and who excluded (and who in the midst were spying on the rest); coalitions met in the streets in front of Trump Towers across the nation; and, while some “dangerous” academics were added to a

registry without their knowledge or consent, others sought to add themselves to the same list in solidarity with their colleagues. In their article in this issue, “Performing Grief through Teacher Activism and Curriculum: Case Studies from Social Movements in Oaxaca and Buenos Aires,” Jennifer Lee O’Donnell and Stephen T. Sadlier suggest that educators also focus on the pedagogical potential of grief; sometimes, they point out, “collectively expressed anguish and outrage may be all that’s left to say, all that’s allowed to be said.” Public and performative grieving—in O’Donnell and Sadlier’s powerful recounting, for the murder of teachers and other attacks on public educators and education in Mexico and Argentina—can bring together our teaching and our activism. Countering the individualization of sorrow with communal displays reframes the moment; the loss of teachers and schools is a social problem, and the solutions will also be social.

With these and other contrasts and conflicts in mind, what continues to buoy us in this moment are the histories of powerful organizing that we can lean on and draw from. In particular, we are excited by the centrality of community, not charismatic leaders, in today’s movements. For example, Patrice Cullors, one of the founders of Black Lives Matter, described it as a movement “not following an individual” because it is “leader-full” and values the skills, views, and experiences of its many antecedent and current participants (Martin). This, of course, is an old story: “Strong people don’t need strong leaders,” activist Ella Baker proclaimed during the civil rights movement, something that many struggling against forms of state violence—Wobblies, queers, Black Pullman porters, the thousands that stayed the course against the pipeline in North Dakota, including the Standing Rock Sioux—knew intimately. This “leaderful” perspective can infuse our teaching: As just one of several examples in this issue, Juilee Decker’s “Beyond Cul-De-Sac Pedagogy: Museum Studies as a Landscape of Practice” describes an undergraduate classroom project focused on making accessible online histories of organizing and social change revealed in an exhibition on the campus of the Rochester (NY) Institute of Technology, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Renewal in Rochester: Narratives of Progress and Poverty*. Through their close look at the exhibit content, students came to see continuities between early twentieth-century garment workers’ protests for better wages and an eight-hour workday and today’s Fight for \$15 campaign.

In this way, Patrice Cullors amplifies a sense of being connected across time, through commitments to justice and human capacity. This form of community—a through-line between generations, peoples, and efforts—is under-recognized and under-valued. This is no accident, of course. As James Loewen has documented, official histories taught in schools and through national monuments and markers present partial and top down, at best, versions of political events, leaving out the stories of everyday people fighting for freedom. Even when known, these histories are often misrepresented with the goal of fracturing groups and slowing the momentum toward change; examples abound, including

red-baiting and the treacheries of Cointelpro, through to today's surveillance of Black Lives Matter groups (Craven; Joseph). This fight to know, learn, and teach radical histories, and to teach history radically, makes the current struggles on campuses, in classrooms, and over curriculum across the US both dangerous and full of possibility. Such possibility is demonstrated in Michelle S. Hite's essay, "Finding the Back Entrance Unsuitable: Liberation, Pedagogy and South-View Cemetery," which centers Black life in the overwhelming presence of Black death.

In our communities we take inspiration from many sources. Libraries "promote education, research, and discussions," notes a librarian in the *New York Times* article on post-election racist vandalism (Mele), and it's a pleasure to find, for instance, beautiful political books to share with the children in our lives, including *A Rule Is to Break: A Child's Guide to Anarchy* (Seven and Christy), *A Is for Activist* (Nagara), and a radical coloring book, *Color Me Resisting*, produced by the For the People Artists Collective, with support from the Chicago Childcare Collective.

Our offices, classrooms, homes, and even bodies are festooned with images, phrases, and names that remind us that we are not now, and never have been, alone in our struggles for justice: The People's History Poster Project (Just Seeds), Philadelphia Printworks, and Half Letter Press (a project of artists Marc Fischer and Brett Bloom) are all good sources for energizing art, literature, banners, and t-shirts. Our landscapes are not all celebrations of struggle, though; the pedagogical work is also to remember and honor the many who gave their lives to support movements for liberation that they would never experience in their lifetimes; from abolitionists who fought to end slavery to the many in ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) who forced the nation to pay attention to, and direct resources toward, HIV/AIDS. These attempts to render visible and share counter-narratives can frame ideas and histories and support change-work in the moment and over time. From caregivers reading to the very young, to K-12 educators organizing across the US in support of all communities' rights to learn and flourish, and undocumented, queer, Muslim, and other students organizing on our university and college campuses, there are as many examples to energize us as there are problems to be addressed.

So, while in our current political context "community" is impossible, it is also the only pathway forward. Freedom, as Angela Davis writes, is a constant struggle. Individuals tire. But together, we can ensure movement continues. With this long view in mind, records and archives are indispensable, not as mandates or as "common core curricula" for organizing, but rather as contributions to a commons of resistance, for the long haul. As we enter yet another crossroads in the "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman), this is a time to dig deep, to learn, and to remember histories of organizing, to stretch ourselves, and to act collectively. Those of us in educational spaces can, should, and will do some of the needed heavy lifting: ensuring that clubs such as Students for Palestine and Feminists for Reproductive Rights have meeting space on campuses and are not targeted

Figure 4 Image from  
*Color Me Rad!* 2014  
Chicago Childcare  
Collective Coloring  
Book.



*todos los cuerpos son buenos cuerpos*

by police, and that colleagues who teach the poetry of Pat Parker or the works of Edward Said are not isolated and marked for dismissal.

This moment is but one more, not an aberration or outlier—and the work continues. We are making demands and organizing. Sometimes we strategize well, and sometimes we have successes. And sometimes all we have is our grief and resistance in the face of failure. What can we learn by studying these ongoing moments? By not losing track of history's urgencies, and our own and our communities' anguish, we still have the possibility that we will sharpen our understanding and skills, engage, and eke out some justice as we continue on.

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guest editors

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