

CHAPTER 3

Participatory Action Research in the Contact Zone

MARÍA ELENA TORRE AND MICHELLE FINE WITH
NATASHA ALEXANDER, AMIR BILAL BILLUPS,
YASMINE BLANDING, EMILY GENAO, ELINOR MARBOE,
TAHANI SALAH, AND KENDRA URDANG

Teaching is possibility in dark and constraining times. It is a matter of awakening and empowering today's young people to name, to reflect, to imagine, and to act with more and more concrete responsibility in an increasingly multifarious world . . . The light may be uncertain and flickering; but teachers in their lives and works have the remarkable capacity to make it shine in all sorts of corners and, perhaps, to move newcomers to join with others and transform.

(Maxine Greene, 2003: 72–3)

Maxine Greene writes on the possibilities of teaching, the provocation of aesthetics and the capacity to “join with others and transform.” We have had the privilege of learning with and from Maxine, and we take her teachings seriously in our participatory action research (PAR) with youth, a form of activist pedagogy. We write this chapter as a very diverse collective of (once) high school students, college faculty, artists, poets, writers, graduate students, and college students. We form a collective interested in activist research designed to challenge the injustices of public education and the prison industrial complex. In our work, we add a dimension that is typically not discussed in PAR; that is, we seek to open up a conversation about PAR inside a *contact zone*.

By framing our PAR collective as a contact zone, we create a politically and intellectually charged space where very differently positioned youth and adults are able to experience and analyze power inequities, together. Privileged youth who otherwise might opt out of such work (as it potentially challenges a system which benefits them) ally with historically marginalized youth, who also might not have joined the research collective (as they have learned well that change is slow and promises are rarely kept). As a collective, we have *used* our differences (rather than ignoring them) to further thinking, research, writing, and speaking on educational equity and change. In the following pages, we will describe in detail the Opportunity Gap Project and the *Echoes Arts and Social Justice Institute* that led to the creation of *Echoes of Brown: Youth Documenting and Performing the Legacy of Brown v. Board of Education*.

In this chapter, in particular, we concentrate on how we *work on and through power inequities*, and *across and through differences*, and how this affects the consciousness and the political engagements of youth researchers. While we all speak throughout this chapter, the second half focuses explicitly on youth researchers' analyses and poetry about the political, aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual opportunities of PAR in the contact zone:

- to connect “personal struggles” with historic struggles for justice (see Mills, 1959; DuBois, 1990);
- to convert individual experiences of pain and oppression into structural analyses and demands for justice;
- to interrogate the unfairness of privilege; and
- to link activist research to youth organizing movements for social justice.

Designing Research in a Contact Zone

We borrow the language of contact zones from María Elena Torre (2006), who draws on the writings of Mary Louise Pratt (1991) and Gloria Anzaldúa (1987). Pratt first introduced the term “contact zone” to describe “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt, 1991: 4). Torre extends the notion into the psychology of inter-group relations, suggesting that within contact zones psychologists can witness a textured understanding of human interaction *across* power differences. Analytically, this provides us an opportunity to “push our psychological theorizing beyond simplified binaries such as oppressor/oppressed or colonizer/colonized and understand relations between” (Torre, 2006: 2). By interrogating social relations in contact zones, we can collectively examine what Anzal-

dúa (1987) calls “the borderland.” A contact perspective “foreground[s] the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination . . . [It] emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other . . . in terms of co-presence, interaction, [and] interlocking understandings and practices” (Pratt, 1991: 5). Theorizing PAR as a contact zone, thereby underscores the ways subjects are constituted “in and by their relations to each other,” and also the multi(ple/people) constructions of knowledge and research (Torre, 2006).

Participating in something like *Echoes* and the Arts and Social Justice Institute was the first time where I had to work as closely and as intensely as I did with people who were so different from me. The project brought youth from very different racial, economic, academic, and social backgrounds into one space to be creative and to most importantly just be themselves. The comfort and safety that was established in the very beginning was instrumental in allowing for the work to get done and for the performance to be shaped and constructed.

(Emily Genao)

As Emily describes, the *Echoes* project brought together an intentionally diverse group of young people—by gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, “track”; by experiences with racism, sexism, homophobia, school administrators, social service agencies, “the law”; by (dis)comfort with their bodies, dance, poetry, groups, etc. In spring 2003, we recruited youth who were interested in writing, performing, and/or social justice from public schools and youth programs in the greater New York metropolitan area, including northern New Jersey.¹ In doing so, we consciously created a “contact zone,” a messy social space where differently situated people “meet, clash, and grapple with each other” across their varying relationships to power (Pratt, 1991: 4). With an important sense of purpose, our contact zone was organized around creating a performance of research, poetry and movement that would contribute to the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Structuring a research space as a contact zone invites a textured understanding of human interaction across power differences. In such a setting, questions of “history and politics,” power, privilege, and oppression can be interrogated across lines of race, age, religion, gender, sexuality, and generation. As youth researcher Kendra Urdang explains:

What I found most remarkable about *Echoes* was that it gathered a group of youth—all from completely different backgrounds and at

completely different stages in their lives—and engaged them in discussion about history. Not only do so few people my age care about history and politics, but when they do, few adults care to listen to what we have to say. No matter our age, religion, race, gender, or sexual preference, *Echoes* gave us the opportunity to converse honestly about race, politics, discrimination, and our place in it all, past and present. Furthermore, it was adults who encouraged us to do so in the first place. Rather than having to create a safe space for and by ourselves, each week we found ourselves being pushed by adults to reevaluate our comfort zones, be them political, social, or poetic. I felt that by the end of the almost year-long *Echoes* project, there were no barriers among us. We talked freely about ourselves, our ideas, and our ambitions, and understood which differences between us were valuable, and which were also irrelevant.

(Kendra Urdang)

We created a space for contact, but we know that contact carries with it a complicated dialectic. While it can be improvisational and generative, it can also be unwanted and invasive (Tuck in conversation with M. Fine, 2007). That is, under the name of contact, wars, imperialism, colonialism, and rape have been waged.

So have coalitions for social justice.

Thus, in creating the *Echoes* space, we took seriously issues of power, privilege, oppression, participatory action research, and responsibility. Fed by the writings of Linda Thuwai Smith, Nancy Fraser, Amartya Sen, bell hooks, and others, we sought to create a context in which high school and college students would come together with graduate students, activists, faculty, lawyers, writers, and poets—all importing very distinct situated knowledges, within very differently marked bodies, carrying heavy and light loads of biography, privilege, and oppression of racial injustice into spaces we call school.

We began with an awareness that even before we entered the room, power dynamics were already in play, needing to be gracefully deconstructed if we were going to collaborate across zip codes, ethnic biographies, communities, and generations, with trust (see Nancy Fraser, 1990, on the bourgeois public sphere).

I just want to be honest with you guys, after the first day in the group, my mother warned me about what to expect. She said “Natasha, I want you to just be aware that sometimes White folks, when they are working with you, are caught up in a White man’s burden kind of thing. They’re wrapped in guilt and just want to do good for Black

and Latino students, like make things right in school. Sometimes you might run across this.” So I kind of had this in mind when we started. But then it changed. I saw that people here weren’t really like that . . . It’s hard to say how it changed for me, I guess it was by the kinds of conversations we had. The way you talked about high and low power groups, and how we weren’t just talking about race. And then when we were talking about some groups wanting schools for just one kind of people, how Michelle said that although she really believes in integration, some of us in the room might feel strongly about the need for separate spaces. And that she’d be willing to work for low power groups to have spaces of their own—like a school for African American students, or all girls—but that she wouldn’t do it for a high power group. That they wouldn’t really need her help.

(Natasha Alexander)

These are the very issues of power that contact zones insist on engaging. PAR in the contact zones opens up such rich avenues for analysis about injustice “out there” but also “in here.” Purposely creating *Echoes* as a contact zone, we took on the responsibility to carve out a context that was strategically infused with issues of power, rather than naively pretending it was one “vacated” by power. We did this not simply by remedial means—that is, by giving “voice” to those “oppressed” or simply by counter-hegemonic challenge—encouraging those with privilege to express guilt and responsibility and redeem themselves. Instead, we created a common project for analyzing the patterns of social (in)justice, generated with youth, sculpted from the clay of social history, participatory research, and the personal experiences of the young people present.

The Opportunity Gap and *Echoes of Brown*: Youth Documenting and Performing the Legacy of *Brown v. Board of Education*

To ground our conversation, we introduce a multi-site project of participatory action research (PAR) launched with youth—street and suburban, Advanced Placement Program (AP) and special education, African-American, Latino, Asian-American, immigrant and White American, wealthy and poor—to map the political economy and social psychology of educational injustice in the United States today. Organized as *doubled resistance*, the Opportunity Gap Project was designed to reveal the presence of deep, historic, and sustained injustice in schools, as well as the clever, creative, and exhausting ways that youth of poverty—and privilege—every day resist and negotiate these injustices. Further, this project was designed to provoke action in discrete and linked sites.

In fall 2001, a group of suburban school superintendents of desegregated districts gathered to discuss the disaggregated Achievement Gap data provided by the states of New Jersey and New York. As is true nationally, in these desegregated districts, the test score gaps between Asian-American, White American, African-American, and Latino students were disturbing. Eager to understand the roots and remedies for the gap, Superintendent Sherry King of Mamaroneck, New York, invited Michelle and colleagues from the Graduate Center to join the research team. We agreed, under the condition that we could collaborate with a broad range of students from suburban and urban schools, to create a multi-year participatory action research project. We understood well Anisur Rahman's belief that:

Liberation, surely, must be opposed to all forms of domination over the masses . . . But—and this is the distinctive viewpoint of PAR—domination of masses by elites is rooted not only in the polarization of control over the means of material production but also over the means of knowledge production including, as in the former case, the social power to determine what is valid or useful knowledge.

(Anisur Rahman, 1985: 119)

Over the course of three years of youth inquiry, through a series of “research camps,” more than 100 youth from urban and suburban high schools in New York and New Jersey joined researchers from the Graduate Center of the City University for a PAR project to study youth perspectives on racial and class based (in)justice in schools and the nation. We worked in the schools long enough to help identify a core of youth drawn from all corners of the school to serve as youth researchers—from special education, English as a Second Language (ESL), the Gay/Straight Alliances, discipline rooms, student councils, and AP classes. We designed a multi-generational, multi-district, urban-suburban database of youth and elder experiences, tracing the history of struggle for desegregation from *Brown* to date, and social science evidence of contemporary educational opportunities and inequities analyzed by race, ethnicity, and class (see Fine, Bloom, Burns, Chajet, Guishard, Payne, Perkins-Munn, and Torre, 2005).

The research was all the richer because it had deep local roots in particular youth research collectives tied and committed to real spaces—the streets of Paterson, the desegregated schools in New York and New Jersey, the community-based activist organization Mothers on the Move (MOM) in the South Bronx, and small schools in New York City—and because we facilitated cross-site theorizing and inquiry to deepen the cartography of inequity we were crafting. Thus, as if a friendly amendment, we took seriously Michael Apple's call for *thick, local democracy* and then added

research and organizing that would enable *wide, cross-site analysis*. By blending deep local work with relatively homogeneous collectives, with critical, cross-site analysis, we were able to chart the uneven distribution of finances, cultural capital, opportunities, hope, despair, and resistance. Documenting inequity through youth research we were also nurturing the tools of critical resistance broadly and deeply in this next generation.

At our first session with close to 50 youth from six suburban high schools and three urban schools, the students immediately challenged/disarticulated the frame of the research:

When you call it an achievement gap, that means it's our fault. The real problem is an opportunity gap—let's place the responsibility where it belongs—in society and in the schools.

With democratic challenge stirring, we—including the embarrassed adults—quickly changed the name to the Opportunity Gap Project and re-framed our investigation, sheepishly remembering Friere's words:

the silenced are not just incidental to the curiosity of the researcher but are the masters of inquiry into the underlying causes of the events in their world. In this context research becomes a means of moving them beyond silence into a quest to proclaim the world.

(Freire, 1982)

Students met as research collectives within their local spaces, and they also participated in a series of cross-site “research camps,” each held for two days at a time in community and/or university settings.² In our early sessions, the agenda and questions were set—in pencil—by the adults. At the first retreat, we brought in a “wrong draft” of the survey, which the young people quickly trashed, revised, and radically transformed, and we set much of the skills-building agenda. Over the course of that first weekend, we re-designed the survey to assess high school students' views of race and class (in)justice in schools and the nation. Over the next few months, we translated the survey into Spanish, French-Creole and Braille, and distributed it to 9th and 12th graders in 13 urban and suburban districts. At the second and third camp, another group of youth researchers from the same schools (with some overlap) analyzed the qualitative and quantitative data from 9,174 surveys, 24 focus groups, and 32 individual interviews with youth.

After that first session, the local research collectives began to take up their local work. Within individual schools, community-based organizations, and neighborhoods, the youth research teams determined, with adults, the questions they would study, what they would read, who they

would interview, the music they would listen to, and the methods they would deploy to investigate questions of justice and consciousness. (For more information about these local research projects, see the Participatory Action Research Collective at the CUNY Graduate Center: <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/che/start.htm>.)

Across the three years and these varied settings, we studied up on the history of *Brown*, Emmett Till, Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin, finance inequity, tracking, battles over buses and bilingualism, the unprecedented academic success of the small schools movement, new schools for lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender students, and the joys, dangers, and “not-yets” of integration. We read on the growth of the prison industrial complex at the expense of public education, and we reviewed how, systematically, federal policy has left behind so many poor and working-class children.

We collected and analyzed data from the large-scale, broad-based survey moving across suburban and urban schools, and also rich, local material from the site-specific research projects. Designed to dig deep, these local projects included an in-depth study of the causes and consequences of finance inequity; an oral history of a South Bronx activist educational organization (MOM), in which founding members were interviewed by their children and grandchildren; a systematic investigation of the racialized tracking of students in middle school mathematics; cross-school visits, interviews, and senior transcript analysis to document differential access to AP courses and suspension rates by race/ethnicity and track in suburban schools (e.g. the extent to which “test scores” differentially predict enrollment in AP classes by race/ethnicity).

Together we created a topographical map of the racial, ethnic, and class (in)justices in secondary public schools. We documented structures and policies that produce inequity, the ideologies and youth beliefs that justify the gap, and those spaces within schools and communities in which educators and youth have joined to create extraordinary collaborations to contest the “gap.” We wrote scholarly and popular articles, delivered professional and neighborhood talks. We traveled the nation to gather insights, listen to young people, and to provoke policy, practice, and change with our research.

Our research, conducted across some of the wealthiest and poorest schools in the nation, confirms what others have found: a series of well-established policies and practices assure and deepen the gap. The more separate America’s schools are racially and economically, the more stratified they become in achievement. In our empirical reports on these data, we refer to these ongoing sites of policy struggle as *Six Degrees of Segregation*:

- urban/suburban finance inequity;
- the systematic dismantling of desegregation;

- the racially coded academic tracking that organizes most desegregated schools;
- students' differential experiences of respect and supports in schools;
- the class, race and ethnicity based consequences of high-stakes testing; and
- the remarkably disparate patterns of suspensions and disciplinary actions (see Fine, Roberts, and Torre, 2004 for details).

Buoyed by our research findings and participatory process, during 2003 we conducted many feedback sessions in schools and communities throughout the suburban communities circling New York City, and we presented our material to groups of educators and policy makers throughout the country. As we traveled with the stories of our findings, we worried, however, about the limits of talk. We saw most audiences nod in solidarity, but met far too many adults who refused to listen to young people's complex renderings of *Brown's* victories and continuing struggles. We sat inside schools where it was clear that the "achievement" gap—the latest face of segregation—was built fundamentally into the structures, ideologies, and practices of these schools; too heavy to move; too thick to interrupt. The state apparatus was well oiled and justified. We were caught in the waves of what Gramsci and Mouffe have called the passive revolution:

The category of "passive revolution" . . . qualif[ies] the most usual form of hegemony of the bourgeoisie involving a model of articulation whose aim is to neutralize the other social forces . . . enlarging the state whereby the interests of the dominant class are articulated with the needs, desires, interests of subordinated groups.

(Mouffe, 1979: 192)

We found ourselves trapped by obsessive questions pointing to poor youth and youth of color—What is wrong with them? Even in the same school building, we have a gap? But if we stop tracking how else can we teach students at their "natural" levels? We grew weary of the volley of youth interruption followed by adult denial; critical research presented and refused.

To illustrate we take you to a scene inside a feedback session in one of the participating high schools:

"Now I'd like you to look at the suspension data, and notice that Black males in high schools were twice as likely as White males to be suspended, and there are almost no differences between Black males and Black females. But for Whites, males are three times more likely to be suspended than females: 22 percent of Black males, 19 percent

of Black females, 11 percent of White males and 4 percent of White females.” Kareem, an African-American student attending a desegregated high school, detailed the racialized patterns of school suspensions to his largely White teaching faculty. Despite the arms crossed in the audience, he continued: “You know me, I spend a lot of time in the discipline room. It’s really almost all Black males.” Hesitant nods were followed by immediate explanations about how in June “it gets Whiter,” and “sometimes there are White kids, maybe when you’re not there.” Kareem turned to the charts projected on the screen, “You don’t have to believe me, but I speak for the hundreds of Black males who filled out this survey. We have to do something about it.”

Kareem tried to rearticulate the “problem” of suspensions to his teachers as relational and indeed racial. He invited the faculty to collaborate with him on research to investigate these patterns. Once it was clear that the faculty was not likely to take him up on his offer, Kareem took up the persona of the social researcher, reporting the aggregate evidence as a call for action. He explained, calmly, that while the educators might choose to ignore his particular case, they would nevertheless have to contend with hundreds of African-American boys who completed the survey and reported the same. He tried to articulate that this is not an individual problem, not race neutral and not separable from the larger school culture. Kareem provided clear evidence that tore at the ideological representation of the school as integrated and fair. And yet, before our eyes, the school in their adamant refusal to hear, threatened to become ossified, in the words of Franz Fanon: “[a] society that ossifies itself in determined form . . . a closed society where it is not good to be alive, where the air is rotten, where ideas and people are corrupt” (Fanon, 1967: 182, 224–5).

Resisting this toxic atmosphere, Kareem was asking his faculty for nothing less than educational justice. As a youth researcher on our large-scale PAR project interrogating youth perspectives on racial and class (in)justice in public schools, Kareem developed, and then taught other youth, the skills of research, collaboration, and organizing.

And so, in spring 2003, with the anniversary of *Brown* approaching, we decided to move our critical scholarship to performance. We knew well from learning at the feet of Maxine Greene about performance, aesthetics, provocation, and that “A world may come into being in the course of a continuing dialogue” (Greene, 1995: 196). We extended our social justice and social research camps into a Social Justice and the Arts Institute. We brought together a diverse group of young people aged 13–21, recruited from the same schools and beyond, with community elders, social scientists,

spoken word artists, dancers, choreographers, and a video crew to collectively pore through data from the Educational Opportunity Gap Project (Fine et al., 2004); to learn about the legal, social, and political history of segregation and integration of public schools; and to create *Echoes*, a performance of poetry and movement to contribute to the commemorative conversation of the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*.³

We created a performance that brought together political history, personal experience, research, and knowledge gathered from generations living in the immediate and the long shadow of *Brown*. On May 17, 2004, an audience of more than 800 sat in awe of these youth and elders bearing witness to the unfulfilled promise of *Brown*. We also published a DVD/book of the work, including all the elder interviews, a video of the Social Justice and the Arts Institute, youth spoken word, detailed commentary by the adult and youth researchers and educators working on educational justice in desegregated schools, speaking on high-stakes testing, tracking, and the everyday politics of racism—*Echoes: The Legacy of Brown v. Board of Education, Fifty Years Later* (Fine, Roberts, and Torre, 2004).

Educating, Writing, and Performing through Critical Histories

We turn now to think about how PAR in the contact zone affects the consciousness and political work of very distinct kinds of youth by educating critically, writing personal troubles into political struggles, and performing for social justice.

To connect “personal struggles” with historic struggles for justice

One afternoon session during the summer institute, feminist lawyer Carol Tracy was helping the youth researchers/performers historicize the impact of the *Brown* decision on civil rights, feminism, disability rights, and the gay/lesbian movement. Tracy explicated how the *Brown* decision opened doors for girls across racial/ethnic groups, students with disabilities, and gay/lesbian/bi/trans students. The room filled with the now familiar sense of unease and debate. “So, can we talk about the Harvey Milk School?” A small school in New York City designed to support gay/lesbian/bisexual and transgender students had been in the news. “Is this progress . . . a school for lesbian and gay students? Or is this a step backward into segregation again?” The debate was lively, many arguing that all schools should be working on issues of homophobia and that segregating gay and lesbian students would simply be a throwback to the days of segregation.

But then Amir spoke. An African-American youth researcher who at the

time attended a desegregated suburban school, Amir shared his deep disappointment with the unmet promises of his desegregated high school.

When we were talking about the dancer [Kathryn Dunham] and how she walked off the stage in the South during the 1940s because Blacks were in the balcony, I realized that happens today, with me and my friends—at my high school they put the special education kids in the balcony, away from the “normal kids.” They [meaning gay/lesbian students] may need a separate school just to be free of the taunting. Putting people in the same building doesn’t automatically take care of the problem.

Only after hearing about Kathryn Dunham standing up for justice was Amir compelled to stand up against the injustices enacted in the name of “special education.” Amir’s poem, “Classification,” reveals the connections he made from history, and with the lesbian/gay/trans students at the Harvey Milk School:

Possessing this label they gave me,
 I swallowed the stigma and felt the pain of being seen in a room with
 six people.
 Yeah, it fell upon me and the pain was like stones raining down on
 me.
 From the day where school assemblies seemed segregated
 and I had to watch my girl Krystal from balconies . . .
 Away from the “normal” kids
 to the days where I found myself fulfilling self-fulfilled prophecies.

See I received the label of “special education”
 and it sat on my back like a mountain being lifted by an ant—it just
 can’t happen.
 It was my mind’s master.
 It told me I was dumb, I didn’t know how to act in a normal class.

I needed two teachers to fully grasp the concepts touched upon in
 class,
 and my classification will never allow me to exceed track two.
 So what is it that I do—
 so many occasions when the classification caused me to break into
 tears?
 It was my frustration.
 My reaction to teachers speaking down to me saying I was classified
 and it was all my fault.

Had me truly believing that inferiority was my classification.
 Cause I still didn't know, and the pain WAS DEEP. The pain—OH
 GOD! THE PAIN!
 The ridicule, the constant taunting, laughing when they passed me by.

Amir had been working with us for more than a year, as a youth researcher in his high school and then as a spoken-word artist and performer in the Institute. He had never told us about his special education status until that moment. In writing this piece, Amir drew on his experiences as an African-American student in a desegregated school, having spent too many years within special education classes. He pulled from three years of our cross-site research findings, the history of *Brown*, and what he had learned about the dancer Kathryn Dunham. With these strings in hand and mind, Amir argued for a separate school for gay/lesbian/bisexual and transgendered youth in a climate where the price of integration is paid in taunting and physical abuse. In this context of thick critical inquiry, Amir's voice, experience, and rage were embroidered into historic patterns of domination and exclusion, contemporary evidence of youth of color yearning for rigor, respect, and belonging.

I was thinking on the way over [to the Institute] one day, this project is dedicated to exposing injustice . . . And I thought about how much it hurt me one day when I [realized] how they were—they were honestly segregating special education kids from the rest of the school. Like there was a constant effort to do so . . . And the pain I felt that day . . . [my friend] Anthony had to calm me down, because I was really angry. It actually brought me to tears. So I'm like, why wouldn't I bring something like that, to the [*Echoes*] group? I felt that I grew close enough to them to tell everyone . . . Because it's a really dangerous thing. That's why I said [in my poem] that the silence is just as painful, because like no one, honestly, *no one's* speaking about it. And that's what's killing us. And so I wasn't just talking on behalf of me; I was talking on behalf of everybody in it . . . I just saw it as an opportunity, you know? . . . [I]f I get it out here [at the Institute], it'll go directly where I want it to go. To the people who are doing it . . . and if I didn't use this [opportunity], it would be foolish of me, it would be stupid, and I couldn't call myself any type of activist.

(Amir Bilal Billups)

Amir committed himself to bearing witness—for himself and the millions of students in special education who “can't speak.” Amir's performance has been shown to audiences throughout the United States, in England, New

Zealand, Israel/Palestine, and Iceland, and in each session, amidst the tears, there are confessionals from youth, parents, community members, and educators about the scars of education and about that one teacher who “changed my life.”

To convert individual experiences of pain and oppression into structural analyses and demands for justice

As if walking with the words of French social theorist Erica Apfelbaum whispering in his ears, Amir was driven by the “imperative to tell—the vital urge not to forget— . . . driven by the imperative to . . . awaken . . . others” (Apfelbaum, 2001: 30).

So too was Tahani Salah, a Palestinian-American young woman and spoken-word artist of the *Echoes* project. Tahani used the *Echoes* Institute to write through her individual experiences of pain and oppression and move them into structural analyses and political demands for justice. In her poem “How do You Know?,” a piece she developed from work she began during *Echoes* Institute, she forces audiences to face everyday life at the very center of oppressive histories, policies, and practices. In the spirit of Apfelbaum, Tahani insists on remembering stories of Palestinian-Americans. Interrupting post-9/11 narratives, she speaks aloud of experiences that others wish to erase with fear and ignorance.

The woman across from me thinks
that I might not let her get home to her children tonight
or ever again.

The woman next to me feels bad for me.
She wishes I had just as much freedom as she does.

At the end of every day when stepping on to the subway car more
then half of the people think that I am on some militant mission to
kill them.

This is not the cliché black man walks on to elevator white women
cliché bag.

This is I’m going to kill you for a political statement.
I have nothing to live for but destruction.

How do you know?
All because you couldn’t understand my faith.
So then you created this idea of a savage.
This inhuman beast.
With empty eyes to match the empty heart.

If you only knew how I fill trusted eyes with revolutions.
 How spoken word has freed me from literal shackles
 How words light signal fires within me.

As I stood at the end of the subway car
 train swerving back and forth
 I could hear the heartbeat of the people
 Getting faster and faster.
 They were finally going to face their truth

I will no longer be the guinea pig of America's idea of
 what a Muslim American woman should be.
 I am a student of an Ivy League school
 three jobs and two that I don't even get pay for.
 I have more than enough to live for.
 But most of all I have god I have my faith.
 Every morning and every night that I've been blessed with
 Everything that has been stolen from my parents
 I have everything that's been ripped from their finger tips
 Everything they couldn't fight.

My life, my voice, my freedom

So speak the unspoken
 And the lord has given you a voice
 And they have been given the power of defeat.
 Don't you dare let them defeat you.

To interrogate the unfairness of privilege

Echoes was not designed as a safe space for demographically similar peers to challenge injustice nor to learn about how "others" suffer. It was not a precious, protected corner to critique stereotypes and the micro-aggressions of everyday life. While we have great respect for the need and life of "safe spaces" in which historically oppressed groups gather to be free of, safe from, and challenging of dominant policies and practices (Fine and Weis, 2000), that was not our project, not this time. We set as a goal, instead, to bring very diverse young and older people into a space, strewn with dynamics of privilege and power, and take up just those questions in our search for a project of collective struggle.

A number of the youth performers, particularly White students from the suburbs, used the *Echoes* space to work through their own questions

about privilege in “desegregated schools” where they benefit enormously, if ambivalently (Burns, 2004), from the well-known and equally well-silenced racialized stratifications in their schools. One such youth performer was Elinor Marboe, a White young woman who wrote with wonder and rage about the racialized practices newly visible to her within her desegregated suburban high school:

Self segregation in my public high school
Different colored threads, on separate rolled spools.
Is this a topic on which I can speak?
Because my skin isn't brown
versus Board.

The Hispanic kids who sit in the Post Cafeteria—do I sit with them?
Well, no.
We get along. We get along well. One hand.
One hand of the solution.
But few kids have friends of other races.
Where is that other hand?

There was one black girl in my AP American class.
One day we read a poem comparing Booker T. to W. E. B.
And we all stared at Alana
waiting for her response.
Then we realized we were staring,
and slowly turned our heads, real casual,
like nothing had happened.

But it had.

Kids are taught at my school that communities are divided by race—
This is the norm. This is acceptable.
This blister of a problem, turning purple red and filling with fluid as
we speak:
My education, my school is shaped like a barbell,
And I'm only at one end.

(From *One Hand Clapping* by Elinor Marboe)

In the beginning of the week, Elinor was asking herself and others about whether or not remaining silent in the face of injustice is problematic. By Thursday, she was clear that *not* speaking up against racially inequitable settings could not be justified as neutrality. In her performance, after

speaking the words, “slowly [we] turned our heads, real casual, like nothing happened,” she wrote the following stage directions: LONG PAUSE, TURN OF THE HEAD, and then, LOOKING STRAIGHT AT THE AUDIENCE, and then, said “But it had.” Elinor narrated, for fellow White students and audience, the damage wrought by refusing to speak out and turning away.

The *Echoes* collaborative provided an opportunity for youth performers to reach in and meet parts of their identities not often felt or exposed. For Elinor this meant a chance to think through her relationship to power, the silence of privilege and the vulnerability of participation. This process was facilitated by regular group conversations, check-ins, poetry read-arounds, and group feedback sessions, in all of which everyone (from youth participants to workshop presenters) had the opportunity to comment and contribute ideas. The layering of these activities across the writing, movement, and research components allowed youth to participate differently in different moments—highlighting alternate parts of their identities as they desired. Elinor described this as a “fresh start,” a rare moment to try a new set of selves:

Well being around a group of people that’s like a completely fresh start, like there wasn’t . . . I don’t know, I didn’t feel like I was the kind of quiet sarcastic girl, you know, which comes out more in school . . . [laughs] in the beginning [of the Institute] the things I wrote were kind of like humorous, or like they were [laughs] surrealist. I guess they were a little more like, safe, but they were also more prosy . . . And then as the week went on [I began] writing more in the style of poetry and then writing about choosing to be silent, which was so personal and which is like something that I know a lot of my friends say about me and I’ve never been able to defend that much to them. Well, because we don’t really talk about it. But I know they think of me as quiet or as, not necessarily quiet, but not really sharing like really intimate things with them. And to be able to talk about that and then, think about my own school and tracking was really personal too. And I don’t have too many spaces where I’m really honest about things that are difficult or painful.

(Elinor Marboe)

Her experience of the contact zone challenged her to think deeply about her ideas and experiences, incorporating some and resisting others; opened her to new levels of intimacy and vulnerability; and introduced her to the power of collaborative creativity and action. We have found this work—the deconstruction of privilege—to be critical to PAR in the contact zone. If privilege

is allowed to sit unchallenged, then seemingly integrated spaces will dangerously reproduce the damage of social stratification and injustice.

To migrate activist research into youth organizing movements for social justice: Igniting the fire for future revolutions

Within the *Echoes* contact zone, bodies and standpoints of privilege sat side by side with bodies and standpoints of historic oppression. Both brought into this space a set of perspectives that would be voiced, reworked, and blended, gently, deliberately, and intimately. Our differences, discordances, and rough edges were on display. While no one person stood as the embodiment of either privilege or oppression, together we could disarticulate the embodied workings, perversions, benefits, and assaults of social injustice. And only together could we rearticulate a vision of what could be.

Writing “Rap Star” was a very interesting experience for me. My inspiration for the poem came from seeing a kid get arrested. This cop grabbed this African-American kid saying to him “get in the car rap star.” It hit me like a ton of bricks. Hearing the cop say that to this kid made me think, damn is that all he really is to you—just a rap star? And then I thought to myself “you know what, that’s probably what that kid thinks about himself too.” So I wrote about it.

(Natasha Alexander)

Simply being gifted
Was your limitation
Not encouraged to be a doctor or teacher
Made to believe that
Your only true place of success
Is in being some sort of entertainer or athlete

Talk in the staff meeting
Not about your B+ paper
But about how many yards you can throw a football
Or your three point shot
Or your beautiful tenor voice

You’re behind bars now
Upon you those teachers look down
Because they say they put all their time into you
Your path is what you choose, right?
I guess they were never taught that teachers have a high calling

Oh Rap Star, the basement is just cold
 No stage lights, hoes and cars
 No buying rounds of drinks at bars
 Just the silent memories of young men in this cell before you
 Echo from window to door
 You can feel it from ceiling to floor
 You're dead to the core
 You felt this before

About to be shipped off
 Too far from the freedom
 You were once used to
 The liberty God gave you
 The only real privilege you were born into

Gone, gone with the bang of a gavel
 In a court room
 Where Justice, who can't see
 Points arms outstretched to sentence you
 To life, to real life, to the rest of your life
 To the life of so many other young men like you
 Who share this same fate too.

(From *Rap Star* by Natasha Alexander)

After writing and performing this poem, it was published in a newspaper in Manila. A reporter from a newspaper there asked me to send him a copy of “Rap Star” because he thought the issues were relevant to young men in the Philippines—which made me think about young men of color all over the world and about the similarities of their experiences, the injustices they face. I also performed it for a youth-produced documentary called “Pipeline” about the youth to prison pipeline. People have had very strong reactions to my poem—they have told me it’s “so beautiful,” “so moving,” “so powerful” which makes me wonder, how can I take this power and emotion and turn it into action?

(Natasha Alexander)

Since the performance, these youth researchers have published, lectured, and brought their skills to other social movements for educational justice. Some have gone on to participate in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, researching and organizing for finance equity in public schools in New York State. Others have testified in State Legislature for the Performance Assessment Consortium, arguing for multiple forms of assessment

in New York State, rather than the single, high-stakes testing regime that has spiked the dropout rates for poor and working-class African-American and Latino students. Those still in high school have brought their concerns about lack of respect, computers, gym, and college-application support back to their schools, communities, peers, and organizations of educational professionals and organizers. White suburban students have launched campaigns for detracking and a serious look at racial inequities in their schools. Together, the collective has presented its research and spoken word pieces at the National Coalition for Educational Activists, the Public Education Network, and the Cross Cultural Roundtable. These youth have learned the skills of critical research—to reveal and provoke. And they understand that their fame and performance means nothing if they stand alone. For in the end, all came to Amir's conclusion, "I had to speak for the others because the silence, oh the silence, is just as bad."

We leave you with reflections from Yasmine Blanding, a young African-American woman and *Echoes* performer. Two years after the performance at John Jay College, we gathered a collection of "letters to *Echoes*" on the impact of the project on their lives since.

Echoes . . . ?

More like shadows . . . I can't shake it.

The feeling, the voices. I WON'T let it leave me . . . It JUST will not leave me.

You know what? I don't want it to leave me either. It keeps me grounded. It keeps me running, keeps me wanting. Grounded—grounded enough to keep my head up, and to walk with authority, to keep my eyes bright, and to speak up when necessary and certainly when spoken to. It keeps me running, when I think of *Echoes* I think of so much work that has been done, and yet so much work that needs to be done . . . it's funny. It's almost like I don't run out of energy. I get tired only when I run out of thoughts. It keeps me wanting, wanting to be alive, wanting to continue to speak, to share, to change, wanting a world. Wanting a world, with hope of perfection . . . I guess *Echoes* provided vision and voices for me. *Echoes* gave me muscles.

What's so chilly most lol [translation: nice, fly, great] about *Echoes* is, there were so many voices and hands involved . . . how could you forget your mission; your journey? Sometimes things happen, things are said and we get mob mentality. We get all hype/excited for that moment . . . and then the moment's over . . . and so are we (that feeling we had . . . gets lost or subsided). I don't feel like that about *Echoes*. I feel like my mentality is still there, my light isn't even dim. My mob . . . I don't even feel like, I need one anymore. I know that

EVERYONE, needs, SOMEONE. But somehow I don't feel like I have to prove anything anymore. So I've removed my energy from the problem and have dedicated my energy to the solution. *Echoes* . . . the project was revolutionized. It was the battle.

The brain is the strongest muscle we have. I'm happy that I experience *Echoes* . . . and I'm happy to have left my footprints . . . and I excited to say . . . I'm still walking . . . MARCHING. So I feel privileged to say there will be more of MY FOOTPRINTS in the sand, and it makes my heart smile to now be able to say and so will my son's footprints . . .

(Yasmine Blanding)

Notes

- 1 Out of the 13 who applied, all but one were accepted. Three young women applied from the same school. In our attempt to create as diverse a group as possible, we decided not to have more than two students from the same school.
- 2 Many students received high school credits (when a course on participatory research was offered in their schools) and 42 received college credit for their research work.
- 3 The 13 youth were drawn from wealthy and economically depressed communities in the suburbs surrounding New York City and within the city; representing the kind of wisdom born in Advanced Placement classes and the kind born in Special Education classrooms. We joined Christians, Jews, Muslims, and youth with no religious affiliation; those of European, African, Caribbean, Palestinian, Latino and blended ancestries; young people headed for the Ivy League and some who have spent time in juvenile facilities; some who enjoy two homes, and some who have spent nights without a home. We recruited youth interested in writing, performing, and/or social justice from youth groups and public schools in the greater New York metropolitan area including northern New Jersey. We gathered together an intentionally diverse group of young people—by gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, “track”; by experiences with racism, sexism, homophobia, school administrators, social service agencies, “the law”; by (dis)comfort with their bodies, dance, poetry, groups; etc.

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Response to Chapter 3

MAXINE GREENE

I must write about my own perspective, passions, and limitations before attempting to offer a response to a chapter in some ways out of my field. I “do” educational philosophy, meaning that I work to engage students in thinking about their own thinking with regard to the surrounding culture and its symbol systems, centrally involving the arts. In the process, I am concerned about the connections between such concerns and various modes of praxis within and outside of classrooms. I do not consider myself a researcher, although some of my writing falls under a qualitative rubric; and, sympathetic as I am to action research, I cannot claim to have participated in it. Since high school days, however, I have thought of myself as an activist, beginning with work in support of the fated Spanish Republic in the 1930s, including much anti-war and anti-fascist activity, campaigns against capital punishment and censorship, and (obviously) as much intellectual and physical resistance as possible to this administration’s and its allies’ undermining of whatever remains of our democracy. I say all this in order to communicate my support of the principles guiding and underlying the action research described in the chapter to which I am responding. A research project lacking an action component always has seemed to me a more or less useless undertaking . . . Like Dewey, Freire, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison, and many others, I think ideas are of little moment if they exist abstractly beyond the world of human experience; and this seems particularly the case when it comes to educational research and the actualities of teaching and the schools.

If education is thought to be an undertaking aimed at the awakening of every young person, no matter what the “local knowledge” of her/his background may happen to be, to the means of coming to gain a critical understanding of the multiple realities of the world, coming awake in this fashion as participant in ongoing dialogue or conversation, the learner may enter (hopefully in answer to her/his own questions) the diverse provinces of meaning: natural science, social science, the humanities, the arts—and the kinds of praxis each entails. Made to feel inferior, stigmatized, invisible as a living person, no one can feel worthy enough to pose her/his own questions or act to initiate her/his own learning. Racism and the other ways of demeaning human beings are clearly anti-educative . . . because they erode the sense of agency that might allow them to embark on new beginnings—and to begin is to open up spaces of untapped possibility.

When I speak of the provinces of meaning or the range of subject matters that may make accessible diverse perspectives, I am not necessarily arguing for discussions (in the contact zone, the research camps, the range of spaces where young people gather) founded in the liberal arts or any of the social or natural sciences. It does seem to me, however, that what is taken to be “knowledge” in the processes of “action research” is some kind of natural or spontaneous response, for instance, to what may be experienced as oppression. It may be a feeling of being pushed in an unwanted direction, of being powerless under someone else’s domination, of being unfairly excluded. There is little sense of people reflecting on oppression in specifically described forms, as when Freire, for instance, speaks of “banking education,” or Dewey, of the “miseducative.” Nor is there much examination of the sources of oppression, the intentions of particular oppressors, the modes of resistance (found in history, for example). One tends to be left with a feeling of sympathy, but with little comprehension of why schools today are oppressive, whether the aim of public education is to track, separate, segregate, apply the kind of “sorting machine” that favors the privileged and treats the others as mere objects, mere “things.” Or why so many classrooms are “silent,” meaning that few students are released to find and use their own voices.

Impressed by a young researcher like Kareem and his careful work on suspension, by Natasha and her effort to understand higher and lower power groups, and by those who so significantly changed the phrase “achievement gap” to “opportunity gap,” I could not but keep thinking about the discoveries these young people would make if enabled to go beyond naming or describing into serious inquiry with regard to the many meanings and manifestations of “power,” for instance. I remember my own students’ interest aroused by the idea that power is not only exercised from above through the orders, public gestures, and behaviors of those “on top” (presidents,

CEOs, generals, and the like) but disseminated in all sorts of ways: through grading systems, the use of the bell curve, tracking practices, special education, even by the seating arrangements in classrooms. Often these are techniques for neutralizing, instances of “passive revolution.” To point to and study such phenomena in their concreteness is to carry researchers beyond mere abstraction where notions such as “power” are concerned.

Given the culmination in the composition and performance of *Echoes*, it is difficult not to hold in mind that the 1954 decision was made about a half-century ago. Even the striking presence of the “elders” could not eradicate the difference between memory and history. This, too, might be brought to the surface, especially when the differences among memories are recognized. This is a point at which novels might be used—fictions that embody the pain and the awarenesses of persons still personally seared by slavery and the glimpses of possibility that might now and then appear. (I think of *Beloved*, *Song of Solomon*, *The Known World*, *March*, and others.) For those who confront the contact zone as primarily a place where ethnic and other dissonances might be overcome, I recommend works coming out of the East and Middle East, as well as Africa, that make it clear that, for all the importance of cultural experience, identity is not wholly defined by cultural membership, that there remain unduplicable persons to be found in a contact zone.

This was a memorable adventure for me. The very idea of attending to the spoken and written experiences in contexts like those described fills a void in what we think of as educational research. I greatly appreciate as well the tapping of imagination made evident in *Echoes*. If nothing else, the ways in which the making of it contributed to the participants’ sense of mutuality and understanding must be emphasized.

My suggestions are that questioning becomes deliberately encouraged; since it seems so obvious that authentic learning begins with the framing of those Freire called “worthwhile” questions. It is the case that “social justice” must be sought, but how are those terms understood? What of the “sense of injustice”? How does freedom relate to justice? What is the “public space,” and why is it referred to here as a “bourgeois sphere”? Can particular instances of action be identified here? How can a young person’s feeling of being personally and unjustly injured lead to or be related to common or collaborative action? To what degree can a common cause (anti-war work, for example) overcome some of the profound differences in the contact zone?

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and Michelle Fine



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