

Just methods in revolting times

Michelle Fine, *The Graduate Center of the City University of New York*

Abstract

This paper takes up the challenge of critical methods in “revolting times,” as we conduct qualitative research on (in)justice festering within repulsive inequality gaps, and yet surrounded by the thrill of radical social movements dotting the globe. I introduce a call for “critical bifocality,” coined by Lois Weis and myself, to argue for research designs that interrogate how history, structures and lives shape, reveal and refract the conditions we study. Borrowing from critical researchers long gone, W.E.B. Du Bois in his text *The Philadelphia Negro* and Marie Jahoda in her stunning case study *Marienthal*, I offer up a set of epistemological muddles and methodological experiments, hoping to incite a conversation about our responsibilities as critical psychologists in deeply contentious times, refusing downstream analyses and resurrecting instead what Edward Said called “lost causes.”

In these difficult times where the existential desire for change haunts with a sense of impossibility and everyday life is embodied as precarious, I explore how scholars of injustice might resurrect *lost causes*, as Edward Said would argue (2001), with narratives gathered at the radical margins; how we may delicately suture these narratives to history and political economy; how we might collaborate with young people and activists to gather *participatory archives* of subjectivities, critique and desires and thereby curate their *refractive analyses* of dominant institutions, policies and practices (see Unger, 2000; Mayo, 1982; Hall and Fine, 2005). I like to think of these as *just methods in revolting times*.

While I so appreciate the qualitative turn in psychology, it is not enough – as I have done – to accumulate narratives of young people who embody lives of critique and desire; it is imperative now, that we gather from/with them, as informants and co-researchers, testimony that challenges dominant stories and makes legible the underbelly practices that sustain the current “democratic project” in order to “breach the façade” – in the language of Adorno – and provoke the radical imagination - in the language of Maxine Greene. If we are to document the human consequences of structural violence and imagine radical possibilities, there is much to learn from and with those who dwell on the Radical Rim about the contradictory enactments of the State, supportive and destructive policies, generous and evil praxis of dominant systems, ideologies and social arrangements. We begin in Austria, just as 85,000 refugees streamed into the country in Spring 2016.

"I fear we are exiting a time of the neoliberal economy and entering a time of rising fascism." (Rosa Costa & Iris Mendel, "Critical science literacy as pedagogical challenge", Vienna, Austria, 2016)

With these words stinging my ears, I flew from a convening in Vienna on *Psychology and the Publics from the Cold War until the Present* to attend a seminar on gentrification and financialization of housing in NYC where we listened to a substantial body of evidence on the unregulated, voracious appetite of real estate developers and the consequent dumping of bodies of color onto the streets of Manhattan, oddly called homeless rather than evicted and betrayed. Next day I boarded a train up to New Haven to participate in a small academic gathering at Yale, designed by sociologist Elijah Anderson, where we considered the "urban public school" – reviewing evidence on rising Gini coefficients; the grotesque and threatening linear relationship between income and educational opportunity/achievement which takes the visual form of a threatening cloud of evidentiary dots ordered neatly along the regression line; stories and numbers on the massive criminalization of young bodies of color and state sponsored violence against/shooting of black youth. An avalanche of distressing cross-national evidence of circuits of dispossession and privilege flooded me to capacity; as I listened to fears of rising fascism among the Identitarians in Austria and criminalization of humanitarians in Greece now tagged as traffickers for assisting refugees, I returned home to an outpouring of support for Trump in the U.S. We gathered in New Haven – where Yale and poor Black neighbors live extremely divergent lives. They call it the Yale bubble. I walked to the rim where bubble meets exploitation; that's often where I hang, with ethnographic and participatory tools. In all of these spaces we were interrogating the downstream consequences of structural realignment, searching often for answers in the debris.

By Friday night, I realized that neoliberal global capitalism and austerity are not prior to but sit alongside, and synchronize with, State violence; casting a long and relatively opaque shadow on those being dispossessed while profits, credentials and opportunities float upward for all to see. People in the bubble have a hard time imagining life in the shadows or believing what we hear; our affective responses to police shootings, school closings, evictions and varied enactments of precarity differ wildly from those who live under the boot of oppression. In the U.S. we are living in a system in which the muscle and logic of capital is sutured into a sprawling assemblage of state institutions that contain, punish and colonize. Neoliberalism and what may be considered fascism are twinned, racialized and classed. Few trespass across these borders; perhaps that's why White people keep being surprised by videos of police killing Black boys and men, girls and women. I like to imagine that critical qualitative psychologists agree that we have an obligation to wander between and bear witness.

My thoughts turn to Melanie Klein's (1946) good breast and bad, and I imagine

that the State, engorged with interests of global capitalism, has become a two-nippled apparatus, with elites and [privileged] Whites suckling from one breast and people of color, migrants, the poor, queer youth in poverty, from the other, lead paint and all (1). More than twenty years ago, in 1998, Pierre Bourdieu commented on what he called the Right and Left hands of the State:

I think that the left hand of the state has the sense that the right hand no longer knows, or, worse, no longer really wants to know what the left hand does. In any case, it does not want to pay for it. One of the main reasons for all these people's despair is that the state has withdrawn, or is withdrawing, from a number of sectors of social life for which it was previously responsible: social housing, public service broadcasting, schools, hospitals, etc., . . . What is described as a crisis of politics, anti-parliamentarianism, is in reality despair at the failure of the state as the guardian of the public interest (variant 32, www.variant.org.uk).

Swells in a vast sea of despair, over the past three – four decades, in capitalist or socialist regimes, under rule of Republicans or Democrats, the poor have been brutally betrayed and in the past decade, the corrosion of trust and opportunity has leaked upward into the middle class. Collectively we suffer from what Edward Said (2001: pp) called the Lost Cause which, he argued, is “associated in the mind and in practice with a hopeless cause: [a recognition that] the time for conviction and belief has passed, the cause no longer seems to contain any validity or promise, although it may once have possessed both.”

I might argue that from within the gated community of academic psychology, our work may exacerbate a *second instantiation of the lost cause* issue. People collectively embody and experience the *existential evacuation of hope* of which Said spoke, but our field – social psychology in particular – has made a science out of neoliberal ideologies that systematically white-out the *structural and historic causes of injustice and inequity*. The mainstream media, The New York Times in particular, for example through the writings of David Brooks, amplifies and circulates the most neoliberal of social psychological research, offering a frame for readers to “make sense” of the debris of inequality we witness (2). Our journals are filled with articles that interrogate, with strong philanthropic and federal funding, the personal while occluding the structural origins of social inequities. That is, we study GRIT or mindset or implicit bias, all of which may be quite productive, but far less inquiry focuses on the social psychological consequences of White supremacy, evictions, school closings, high stakes testing, police violence, deportations, mass incarceration, inequality gaps or the wide reach and differential accumulations/dispossessions attached to global capitalism.

As a response to Said's call, I would add that the doubling of these lost causes – existential and structural - may of course be no coincidence. Despair – and self harm - may worsen when gross inequities are made to seem natural and irreversible. The New York Times reports that suicide rates have increased 24% from 1999 to 2014 in the U.S.;

mental illness and drug use trends reflect parallel spikes (especially for Whites, which is why its on the front page of the NYT). Despair, like social movements dotting the globe, may rise when the mantle of scientific objectivity mimics and legitimates the perspective of those in power. Theodor Adorno warned long ago:

“The notions of subjective and objective have been completely reversed. Objective means the non-controversial aspect of things, their unquestioned impression, the facade made up of classified data that is, the subjective; and they call subjective anything which breaches that façade, engages the specific experience of a matter, casts off all ready-made judgments ... the holders of power want subjects impotent, for fear of the objectivity that is preserved in these subjects alone” (Adorno 1951, 69-70). (3)

Adorno knew that “holders of power want subjects impotent;” he valued the transgressive possibilities held in the bodies and consciousness of those who dare to challenge, those who contest the false-consensus narrated from the center, those at the radical rim. Said helps us see what is feared in these bodies made limp; stories drained of vitality; causes sent to the pasture of the unrealistic and lost.

Midway through his essay, Said bends toward ironic optimism:
“Many times we feel that the time is not right for a belief in the cause of native people’s rights in Hawaii, or of gypsies or Australian aborigines, but that in the future, and given the right circumstances, the time may return, and the cause may revive. If, however, one is a strict determinist about the survival only of powerful nations and peoples, then the cause of native rights in Hawaii, or of gypsies or aborigines, is always necessarily a lost cause, something both predestined to lose out and, because of belief in the overall narrative of power, required to lose” (2012, 550).

This essay reaches into the political and epistemological subjunctive of radical margins so that critical qualitative psychologists may catalogue critique, despair and activism, situated in history and structure, to refute the impotence, contest the narratives of power and resuscitate the lost causes.

Critical Bifocality and Narratives of Radical Marginality

In 2012 Harvard Educational Review, Lois Weis and I introduced the notion of critical bifocality as a theory/method for interrogating the history, structures and lives that are often occluded by downstream analyses of outcomes, especially disparate outcomes used to demonstrate social inequality. We troubled studies – in education and psychology – that fetishize, dehistoricize and decontextualize outcomes. Within psychology I drew upon W.E.B. DuBois’ Philadelphia Negro (1899), Marie Jahoda’s (1930) Marienthal, and James Dollard’s (1989) Class and Caste in the American South, who elegantly placed lives and communities within the folds of history and racialized

political economy:

We introduce a call for critical bifocality as a way to think about epistemology, design, and the politics of ... research, as a theory of method in which researchers try to make visible the sinewy linkages or circuits through which structural conditions are enacted in policy and institutions as well as the ways in which such conditions come to be woven into community relationships and metabolized by individuals. We seek to trace how circuits of dispossession and privilege travel across zip codes and institutions, rerouting resources, opportunities, and human rights upward as if deserved and depositing despair in low-income communities of color. (Weis and Fine, 2012, 173)

In the present essay I migrate Critical Bifocality into conversations about qualitative research in psychology because I believe psychology as a discipline, social psychology in particular, has been complicit in severing outcomes from history and structures; that we have contributed to the erasure of lost causes, and that we have marginalized voices at the rim, voices of dissent - what Gloria Anzaldua would call wild tongues. And because I believe critical bifocality may help us re-view the past, reframe the present and reimagine the future.

“Wild tongues cannot be tamed, they can only be cut out.” (Anzaldua, 1987: pp)

For thirty years I have accompanied marginalized youth born at/exiled to the rim of racialized political economy and sexual hierarchies in the U.S., with ethnographic and later participatory methods, archiving their discursive cocktails of despair and wisdom: school push outs, young women in prison, Muslim American youth contending with the US war on terror, children attending profoundly under-resourced and structurally violent schools and, most recently, LGBTQ youth of color betrayed by a series of public and private institutions and relationships. Wild tongues and broken hearts, they embody and enact what Sara Ahmed (2014) calls “willful subjectivities,” as a strategy to avoid “extinction.” So many of these young people defy the predictions of Erving Goffman on stigma or Kenneth Clark on internalized self-hatred, and engage instead in what Clara Mayo, Rhoda Unger, bell hooks and Ruth Hall have called radical marginality (Hall and Fine, 2010).

I realize, in retrospect, that I rely on these young people as canaries in the racialized/classed/sexualized mine. Their narratives and bodies speak boldly, with adolescent volume, of the betrayals even if they don't have the words or numbers or policy-talk to name the forms of governmentality that have reigned down on their bodies, communities, parades. This, I have decided, is a critical psychology project, to reattach the severed limbs of bodies, history and structure, even as, and because, the neoliberal project is to dissect, distribute and re-visualize disposable bodies as if they were autonomous from history, freed from political or social constraints, marinating in circumstances of their own making.

Drawing on critical bifocality, across and with various communities, I have tried to trace the history, structures and policies impinging on young lives as they grow up in conditions of cumulative dispossession. I have long been the stenographer/analyst of their narratives, braiding brilliant critique and luscious desires, of young people stationed/exiled/, or those who have deliberately wandered to the margins of schools, political economy, immigration struggles, Islamophobia, disability and sexuality based exclusions.

In the 1980s, through critical ethnography, I hung out in classrooms at CHS (Comprehensive High School), and then visited school “drop outs” in apartments, parks and on the subways, transcribing their full-bodied critique of educational reproduction, racism, boredom and moved by their yearning for recognition that fueled their early exit from high school. I wrote an ethnographic volume called *Framing Dropouts* (1991), in conversation with Paul Willis’ *Learning to Labor* (1977). Based on U.S. psychological research, I had expected to find young people who dropped out to be filled with despair, feeling helpless and depressed; at least that was what the quantitative literature had encouraged me to believe. What I found instead were two distinct psychological states oozing over time. Young people who had left school within three months of the interview were chatty, filled with social critique and a rich sense of future possibility. Mobilized by a braided sense of possibility and betrayal, the young people who had just, within months, exited their schools were eloquent in their criticism of the economy and schools, percolating questions about racism and brimming with hope and enthusiasm for alternatives. “I am going to move to New Jersey; put my baby Tiffany in Catholic schools; attend [vocational/proprietary school] Wilfred Academy of Beauty and Finance and start over” was a classic response to “What’s next?” Dreams were vivid, hopes strong. Then I interviewed long term dropouts, those who had dropped out three years prior; they had tried and failed on a series of options to schooling. These interviews were hard, for them and for me. Apartments filled with unpaid bills, “Can you help me understand this bank statement?”, diapers, smoke, crying babies, not enough food and despair. For these young people, over time, their social critique metastasized to self-blame. When we spoke, they were looking backward with some embarrassment and buckets of regrets. “I shouldn’t have played cards in seventh grade.” “I shoulda listened to my third grade teacher.” Structural critique evaporated.

While critique and desire propel vibrant movements for future change (personal and collective), the cumulative consequences of punishing social realities and profit-making seductions mute and redirect structural criticism so that the sharp arrow of critique turns back on self over time.

I offer below a 25 year reflection that moves across time and space, from then to now and back. I try to signal what I learned about the wisdom and hope of young people at the margins; what I came to appreciate about the difficulty of sustaining structural critique and personal possibility over time in brutally punishing contexts that are

racialized and classed, and what I failed to anticipate about the long arm of the criminal justice system and the promiscuity of public institutions catering to the irresistible forces of wealth and White privilege in realigning public life in urban America:

It was 1988 when I sat in the back of what I called Comprehensive High School's auditorium and cried salty tears of joy and rage. I had interviewed scores of these young people, almost 40 recent drop-outs and then a dozen of their slightly older peers who had dropped out three years prior. I remembered a conversation with Lucinda, as we sat in Morningside Park, two months after she dropped out:

MF: "Were you the kind of student who participated a lot in class?"

Lucinda: "No, not me. I was a good kid."

It took me a minute to realize that in my high school classes (largely white and middle class in a 'desegregated' school) participation was evidence of "being a good kid," but not in her's (Black and low income). Race and class matter. The construct "participation" doesn't travel simply across the borders of race and class.

Two hundred and fifty young people walked across the stage with flowers and corsages to cheers and the rapid lights of cameras flickering. Mothers, aunts, fathers, siblings, grandparents gathered from the Bronx and Harlem, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic to celebrate their babies graduating high school. My field notes read, "I just want a moment of silence for the five hundred missing." In a school of three thousand, barely one-twelfth graduated. Where are the "disappeared"? If this were a school with middle-class White students, everyone would be outraged; it would be closed. What we tolerate for the poor would be unthinkable for elites. At Brandeis, in the 1980s and certainly since, I learned that it was normative for Black and Brown bodies to drain out of public institutions without diplomas and without setting off alarms. Progressives and conservatives may explain the leakage differently—racism/capitalism versus poor motivation/ inadequate intelligence/bad mothering—but too many agreed that it is inevitable.

Little did I know that in the late 1980s, mass incarceration was seeping into the darkest neighborhoods of New York State. The state coffers were quietly realigning budgets and transferring monies and bodies of color from schools to prisons. In 1973 the state's prison population was ten thousand; by 1980 it had doubled to twenty thousand; by 1992 it had more than tripled again to almost sixty-two thousand.

As I sat in that gymnasium, I didn't realize that the state had other bids on their bodies. Only later would I learn that "since 1989, there have been more blacks entering the prison system for drug offenses each year than there were

graduating from SUNY with undergraduate, master's and doctoral degrees—combined”

Almost twenty-five years later, after generations of disinvestment and disproportionate placement of difficult-to-teach, overage, undercredited students into the building, in the midst of a swelling inequality gap in wealth, income, real estate, and human (in)security, the New York Times reported that the school was in “crisis;” declared a failure and needed to be closed. Truth was, the neighborhood was gentrifying and the White neighbors wanted their school back. Based on test scores, graduation rates, and cumulative disregard, Brandeis, like so many other comprehensive high schools serving Black and Latino youth, would be closed and re-opened as a complex of four small schools including the new Frank McCourt High School for Journalism and Writing, sponsored by Symphony Space and adorned with the support of local parents and community. Ironically, in his name, the Frank McCourt School was being designed, by some, for the newly gentrifying families of the Upper West Side.

I started attending community meetings about the Frank McCourt School. Most of the sessions were cordial and seasoned with public commitments to “diversity.” But the slippery discourse of classed and racialized deservingness was leaking through the doors.

“I guess this school will be for 3s and 4s?” asked a White mother, referencing test score signifiers (1–4, with 4 being the highest) burned into the consciousness and identity of New York City youth.

“If we are serious about getting these kinds of students into that building, we’ll have to remove the metal detectors,” explained another parent, an African American dad in a business suit.

A well known educational consultant facilitating the discussion elaborated, “If the other schools want to keep the metal detectors, or need them, we might want to use a different entrance.” And soon the discursive architecture of separate and unequal was flooding the room, being spoken by White and Black prospective parents who seemed to be among the new gentrifiers.... The building will be open to children citywide, using criteria that are demographically neutral.” [remember Adorno’s definition of objectivity] Only those students who satisfy the published criteria—score a 3 or 4 on standardized tests, submit a writing sample in English, have good attendance, and post a grade point average of 3.0 in middle school— need apply, and have their parents submit their names into a lottery.”

Test scores in New York are highly correlated with race and class; privately paid tutors often coach writing samples in English; and regular attendance and GPA

are, of course, associated with stable homes and hard work; lotteries systematically under-enroll very poor families, English language learners and special education students. And yet this strategy of educational reform—segregate children by race/ethnicity, class, and academic history into varying strata of schools; measure and publicize differential outcome data; declare crisis and close the school; reopen it for more selective public/corporate charter students—is a national trend baked into federal, state, and local policies promoted by the State and corporate philanthropy.

*In November 1910, W. E. B. DuBois published the first issue of *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, insisting that a record be kept of the ongoing crisis of “the darker races.” DuBois recognized that crisis, for poor people and Blacks in the United States, had been woven deeply into the fabric of our nation’s history; that public schools had served as an institution through which crisis festered and was washed over, structured primarily in ways that reproduce class and racial inequalities?. Like his colleague Carter Woodson, DuBois wrote on the searing capillaries through which systemic miseducation of children of color stains our national history (Woodson, 2010). Most significant for our purposes, DuBois noted that the structural and historic educational crises of the “darker race” would be routinely ignored until they are not. Today, we hear the calls of “crisis,” and the wise ghost of DuBois asks us to be suspect. In 2007 Naomi Klein wrote *Shock Doctrine: Disaster Capitalism* (2007), in which she argued that often immediately after neoliberal or imperial intervention, crises are often declared—in Iraq, Afghanistan, New Orleans—and public assets as well as functions are systematically transferred from government to private, corporate interests. If DuBois and Klein had a baby, it would include the perverse linking of Black pain and elite profit then and now.*

Critical bifocality situates “the problem of school dropouts/pushouts/leavers” within a classed and racialized historic matrix of deindustrialization, criminalization, over-policing and under-employment. The narratives are then curated within these structural intersections, and we come to understand that the young people could sense the betrayal, even if they couldn’t name the structural forces rendering them disposable, and pressing for their institutional exile. While I found no villain tossing them out of the school prematurely, their bodies – like the bodies of the unemployed in *Marienthal*, like the lads in Paul Willis’ volume *Learning to Labor*, and like the “loud Black teens” on public transportation who, in Robin Kelly’s piece “Congested terrain,” were reclaiming public space with music and laughter– their bodies attuned to, spoke back, resisted and reworked the impending winds of dispossession (see Fabricant and Fine, 2013).

Critical bifocality delivers an existentially heavy diary that chronicles the accumulation of dispossession and privilege (Fine & Ruglis, 2008) through bodies and communities; tracing the flow of money and hope circuiting through the capillaries of

race/ethnicity and class; revealing how precisely economic and racial interests that map onto schooling, criminalization, gentrification and the Whitening of Manhattan, and the deceptively measurable metrics of low achievement, motivation and persistence, linked to heightened violence, apathy, a sense of “impotence” among the youth.

Public policies that facilitate dispossession through disinvestment and through what is called restructuring are instituted as if historically innocent and demographically neutral. Young people at the margins knew they were being silenced; their bodies refused to be “pushed out” so they ironically “dropped out,” refusing extinction. But they knew, even if they couldn’t narrate, that they were holding education seats warm until the real/worthy/wealthy and White students could arrive. This kind of theoretical project represents the pulse of critical bifocality, refusing to cauterize outcomes from processes of dispossession and relentlessly tracing how histories and structures penetrate subjectivities. Young people hungry for a justice of recognition and redistribution (Fraser, 2000) smell, resist and embody betrayal, and maybe even enact forms of resistance that ultimately contribute to their own undoing (see Paul Willis, 1977).

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A bit more than a decade after I left Brandeis I facilitated a series of focus groups with Muslim American youth, mostly middle and upper middle class US citizens, who lived comfortably in the suburbs of New York City until the towers fell and their classmates and educators began to suspect, maybe, that the boys were terrorists and the girls oppressed. Selcuk Sirin asked me to join him on a project to document how Muslim American youth development shifted/fractured into what we called hyphenated selves once they were exiled from the moral community called “America” (Sirin & Fine, 2008).

With huge gendered and individual variations, the ideological and bloody grounds of war (ground/drone war in the Middle East and the War on Terror in the U.S.) had penetrated their prec(ar)ious subjectivities. They were, like the Japanese American youth of 50 years prior, flung from the comfort of inclusion within the “American” middle class and branded as Other at home. I expected to find a group of frightened young people; ambivalent about religion, removing hijab and limiting public displays of their beliefs. I couldn’t have been more wrong. With great diversity, these young people voiced a full-throated critique of what they called “America,” but narrated as well their desire to belong, a fierce and relentless sense of entitlement to be viewed as a patriot, a “real American” like their Japanese American peers 50 years before, and/or a conflicted and ambivalent teen. Not particularly radical, they were firm in refusing a Goffmanesque embodiment of shame, especially the young women; most often they exhibited a fierce dedication to reclaim a place in the social arrangements as sometimes patriot, sometimes angry, never terrorist, but often a dissenting citizen willing to

educate others who displayed Islamophobic ignorance. Aisha, a 17 year old Syrian-American who wears hijab explained “I tell people wearing a scarf is like wearing a bicycle helmet; it protects me and gives me courage to travel where I fear.” And when asked how she feels when classroom discussions turn awkwardly her way, she sighed: “Well, I educate them. Really, if I don’t, who will? Who better than me, I watch Al-Jazeera, FOX, CNN news – my peers just go to the mall. So it’s my job to educate them.”

Critical bifocality encouraged us to theorize these young people not only for the particulars of Muslim American youth growing up within the U.S. War on Terror, but as a contemporary instance of a long and painful legacy of Othering that characterizes U.S. history, in which shifting groups of youth – tagged as the Others depending on the enemy de jour of the U.S. (Natives, Blacks, Mexican-Americans, Japanese-Americans, Muslims, immigrant, queer...) - embody and enact the social and psychological dynamics of being denied a home in the only home they know. Critical bifocality reminds us that when we dive into the specificities of group/context/culture, we do not only see what it means to be Muslim American but more to the point we are lifting up evidence on the social psychology of State violence, structural exile and surveillance at home.

Right about so many things, Erving Goffman wrote about stigma as someone who thinks of himself as a “normal” who observes those who carry stigma, narrating from a God’s eye view, bolstered by distant insight, some pity and lots of projection. Perhaps his own existential terrors (or ghosts) of stigma filled the distance between his position and the lives of people who live with the social violence of stigma. Adorno (1951) reminds us that *distance* is not an empty space but a *tension filled field*. We know from scores of studies, the arts, memoirs, and political campaigns that people who have endured stigma don’t simply incorporate dominant messages. They metabolize, resist, rework and engage in what Gerald Vizenor, indigenous scholar, calls *survivance*, a delicate blend of survival and resistance (2008). And yet, having said that, even the most powerfully engaged young person, equipped with conviction and critical consciousness, can be surprised and traumatized by encounters with macro- or micro-aggressions (Anderson, 2016; Nadal, 2013), the sort that many of us (at least White, elite, heterosexual, non-disabled readers) might never even know about:

A 20 year old African American college student told me, group: “I used to like and trust White people – a lot. Then I went to college and heard what you say about us when you are drunk. It’s hard to trust you, even when you’re sober, knowing what you are thinking”

Young people who have cultivated wisdom at the margins of institutional betrayal and economic/racial/sexuality oppression know well the embodiments of and survival skills honed in precarity; they anticipate with exquisite precision (some might mistakenly call it paranoia) the “banality of evil” woven into our public and private institutions, and they narrate with humor and enact with care the individual and collective habits of being necessary to survive and reimagine what else is possible. As

bell hooks has written:

marginality is much more than a site of deprivation, in fact... it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives.” (hooks, 2011, 203 - 206)

Critical scholars of color have long written about the wisdom metabolized in the margins; rarely cited in mainstream scholarship. In her book Demonic Grounds: Black women and the cartographies of struggle (Minnesota, 2006), geographer Katherine McKittrick examines how space and place are embodied, negotiated, resisted and reconfigured by Black women in the diaspora in spaces as diverse as the underground railroad, slave slips, action blocks and Black cemeteries, asking “...how do geography and blackness work together to advance a different way of knowing and imagining the world?” (xxvi). bell hooks (1992) argues that from the margins, Black men and women develop “...an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze... [by] colonized [B]lack people globally” (1616). Patricia Hill Collins (1986) has published on the generative capacities cultivated by the outsider-within, while Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2013) write on the undercommons and the university, theorizing the critical labors and conversations cultivated in the hold of the [slave] ship.

In addition to writers who advance a critical view from the edge, others have persuasively critiqued the narrow perimeters of the view from the perch of the center, those assumed to be normal who embody objectivity. Critical disability scholar Harlan Hahn argued, in 1988, that most research on persons with disabilities had been conducted by persons without disabilities and was saturated theoretically and empirically with what he called the *aesthetic* and *existential anxieties* of the temporarily able bodied – occluding the rich and complex lives and subjectivities of persons with disabilities, and refracting what “disability” conjures temporarily able bodied people. Thirty years before, Carolyn and Muzafer Sherif warned that unless researchers engage in deep deliberation about their/our own values, “*the [researcher’s] autism will greatly influence his design of the study and his collection and treatment of data*” (Sherif and Sherif, 1953, 11).

Moving from the intrusions of individual research “autisms” to collective distortions produced by teams of White men at the center of power, Irving Janis documented the perceptual and cognitive biases that harvest among homogeneous exclusive, elite researchers and policy cabinets. In *GroupThink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (1982), Janice studied the decision-making processes that delivered us the Cuban Missile Crisis, Vietnam War, Watergate and other “policy fiascoes.” After reviewing a broad swathe of (inter)national policy disasters, Janis concluded that “groupthink” overwhelms rationality when elite and exclusive groups, committed to consensus, assured of their moral superiority and aversive to dissenting

perspectives, create work groups constrained by “self-appointed mind guards – members who protect the group from adverse information that might shatter their shared complacency about the effectiveness and morality of their decisions” (174-175) (4).

I end this first half of the paper, with a few provisional insights. First, there is a rich and relatively neglected (in the academy) praxis of knowledge production in the margins that reveals much about the subjectivities, desires and activisms of people who reside there or have been exiled, *and* there is an equally robust body of wisdom that refracts the structurally violent underbelly of public and private institutions made to appear neutral, democratic and objective to those of us situated at the nexus of power. Reginald Rabaka (2015) has written on disciplinary apartheid and decadence, as the consequences of whiting out this knowledge from the canon .

Second, research crafted collectively and critically from the edge, and cast in frameworks both historic and structural, can challenge what has been called an epistemology of ignorance that dominates in social research on race and exclusion (Sullivan and Tuana, 2007). A significant strain of critique from critical (but also mainstream) scholars has long warned of the conceptual, perceptual and epistemological distortions that derive from the perch of power. In my words, we have been cautioned that *epistemological masturbation can cause blindness*; self-pleasuring with one’s own canon of knowledge/research can blind us to the colonial histories, structures and the perverse consequences of seemingly neutral policies.

Third, it is provocative to consider how our theoretical framings, designs, methods, lines of analysis and even our research products change when we craft research projects at the edge, with diverse collectives from community and university, taking seriously lives and structures, interrogating dominant lies and lives/movements at the rim. Below I sketch a newly forming, always shifting, critical participatory action research project by/for/with LGBTQ youth of color and adult activists/researchers. Whereas dropouts were “produced” as disposable by a series of historic and structural circumstances, and Muslim Americans were appropriated as the deflecting Other to justify a war for oil, in this third scene you will see how LGBTQ youth of color enable us to trace how their committed and embodied expressions of “difference” – or what Sara Ahmed calls “willful subjectivities” - can propel a series of intimate and structural betrayals that place them in profoundly precarious circumstances.

In all three contexts, these deeply marginalized young people are exquisitely aware of how intimate, cultural and institutional settings expunge, punish, repel and fetishize their “differences” such that devastating economic, educational, violent and psychic assaults accumulate – not for all, but for many – and they are equally strategic about finding and offering care to those thrown to the wind.

Participatory Designs in the Borderlands

“where the third world grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms, it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country- a border culture” (Gloria Anzaldua, 1987: 3)

Gloria Anzadua is well known for her fierce theorizing of the generative, contentious, creative possibilities in the borderlands. Over the past 20 years, at the Public Science Project (PSP) at the Graduate Center, CUNY, we borrow with delight her theoretical, political and aesthetic provocations. At PSP we have formed a research collective of critical psychologists with activists, policy makers, educators, youth, formerly incarcerated adults, feminists of color, queer youth organizers and everyday people from communities under siege. Together we are dedicated to participatory research to reveal, contest and re-imagine how the institutional moves of neoliberalism in the public sector — aggressive policing, suspensions, school closings, incarceration, high stakes testing – move under the skin, and metabolize into social movements.

We work in the borderlands between the university and community, and between research, action, social movements and social policy. By exploring history, structural arrangements, the (un)intended impacts of policies and the vibrant creativity and interdependence of lives in dispossessed and also privileged communities, we interrogate the accumulation of dispossession, but also of privilege, as human-made processes that can be unmade (Fine & Ruglis, 2008). Descriptions of/products from our varied research projects in prisons, with schools, with activist organizations, can be found on the Public Science Project website (www.publicscienceproject.org).

Critical Participatory Action Research is committed to disrupting what feminist and critical race philosophers call epistemologies of ignorance borne typically at the uncontested center of science:

“Ignorance often is thought of as a gap in knowledge, as an epistemic oversight that easily could be remedied once it has been noticed. Sometimes these ‘unknowledges’ are consciously produced, while at other times they are unconsciously generated and supported. (Sullivan and Tuana, 2013, 1 – 2)

At the Public Science Project, we build research teams that are deeply heterogeneous by standpoint, perspective, status and line of vision and tilt our research questions, as Ignacio Martin Baro (1996) argued, “with a preference for the poor.” By so doing, we migrate Sandra Harding’s (1993) notion of *strong objectivity* into our projects, valuing the deep deliberation among varied perspectives to sculpt research questions, designs, methods, analytic strategies and determine products by delicately exploring - rather than denying - researchers’/community members’/activists’ subjective interests, biases and perspectives. With much variation, many “choques” (Anzaldua’s language for conflicts, creative struggles, contradictions), and much time engaged in collective reflexivity, all of our projects are designed with four commitments:

- We take seriously that expertise is widely distributed but a particular wisdom

about injustice is cultivated in the bodies and communities of those most intimately wounded by unjust conditions;

- Research on oppression must be linked to research on accumulation of privilege;
- Research on history, structures and lives is powerfully produced by contact zones of divergent standpoints;
- Research is most valid and “of use” when designed by/alongside and in the interest of social justice movements and then circulated through lawsuits, academic papers, community performances, social media and products of meaningful engagement with community life and movement actions.

We take a peek below, at an early ethnographic fieldnote of a national participatory project designed with/by/alongside LGBTQ youth of color, to unearth the possibilities, openings and struggles of critical PAR at the radical margins.

What’s your issue?

Just as we were about to sit down for lunch to discuss the possibility of a large grant to launch a national participatory survey by/for LGBTQ youth of color, the foundations officer said to us: “Did you ever notice that the leaders of key youth movements – DREAMERS, Education Justice, Immigration Justice, Black Lives Matter, Black Youth Project 100, Native youth, leaders of disability rights, spoken word poets... are disproportionately queer youth of color?”

We hadn’t – somehow we missed this obvious; so much for theories of double discrimination.

A group of funders approached Maria Elena Torre, Director of the Public Science Project and me, about the possibility of a national, participatory survey of/by/for/with LGBTQ youth of color. To date, LGBTQ youth research has focused on depression, bullying and suicide, sampling largely White, elite kids in Gay/Straight Alliances (that is, in school) and these funders knew that gender nonconforming and queer youth were disproportionately represented among those precariously housed, in foster care and involved with juvenile justice. With very important exceptions, the field needed more dynamic research to document the landscape of structurally intersectional violence against LGBTQ youth of color and the radical possibilities generated by these same young people (5) Over the past year, the *What’s Your Issue Collective* of youth and adults, primarily LGBTQs of color, artists, researchers and activists, have designed a national survey of close to 5000 LGBTQ youth (with strategic sampling on Native reservations and communities of color/immigration, with foster care and juvenile justice facilities, to reach young people who are undocumented or no longer in school or precariously housed). The survey is extended ethnographically by ten community-based policy portraits designed by LGBTQ youth from 10 communities around the country

interrogating more intentionally issues of immigration struggles, housing tensions, involvement with police and school suspensions, unemployment, sex work on the streets, being thrown out of home and school, as structural problems provoked by school/family/church/public institutions reaction to queer and gender non-conforming youth.

To launch the project, we collaborated with scores of LGBTQ/immigration/civil rights/spoken word/activist youth groups to gather a national advisory Board: half youth/half adults, most working at the intersections of racial/sexual justice, immigration and sexuality, disability and sexuality, from rural and urban, high schools and juvenile centers, foster care and community organizations, including artists, activists, educators, researchers and young people. We gathered small groups of young activists in New York City and across the country to draft, edit, borrow, critique and invent survey questions that would integrate existing standardized instruments with “home grown” items that would tap issues of meaning, urgency, debate and controversy to the young people. We piloted these items with satellite groups around the country, linked to community-based organizations in Austin, Tucson, Los Angeles... And then we field-tested our ‘bad draft.’

In August of the first Summer of WYI, more than 150 young people (paid \$15/hour for four hours) streamed into a Korean deli in midtown Manhattan, at Lexington and 48th, climbing the steps to the second floor where the air was an acrid blend of air freshener, mildew and perhaps a slight smell of chlorine/urine. We ate, laughed, traded pronouns/pseudonyms and real names, created and presented colorful banners for “what the world should know about LGBTQ youth.” They split off into groups, for hours, to critique, edit, revise and re-mix the “bad draft” of survey. Across rooms, groups, and arguments we critiqued, re-wrote and reassembled what would eventually become a national, online survey filled with standardized but many more home grown questions about activisms and dreams, betrayals and worries, intersections and anxieties, gifts and dreams. (www.whatsyourissue.com)

I met in a small room with 20 young people from various agencies, activist organizations and educational spaces. Diverse by any measure, we self-selected to discuss some of the more “contentious issues” that might fall into the bucket of epistemological violence; questions on pain, betrayal, needs, questions that could be mis-heard as pathologizing or damage oriented. Long difficult conversations ensued, without consensus, about what to include, how to phrase questions, what to ask and what not to ask.

We learned that the dominant story about bullying, depression, suicide and HIV is of course true and not at all: these issues are of concern, but only within a much richer, more vibrant palette of issues. We heard, powerfully and forcefully, that structural and personal intersectionality, fluidity, and contingency matter, especially for those most marginalized by race, sexuality, economics and immigration status. We

heard from two young people living in “mixed status” households in the South West, one queer and one trans, whose religious families are throwing them out but they want to stay in their homes because “we are the only ones with documentation and we want to care for our siblings.” We met young people who entered the foster care system, in Arizona, and became “foster by gay” because their undocumented families feared the attention that their gender “variance” brought into their homes. We heard from Black LGBTQ youth who attended under-resourced and over-policed schools, stories that confirmed the research by Jennifer Chmielewski et al (2015) that gender nonconforming girls of color have the highest rates of school suspension in NYC. We spoke with deaf lesbians often denied the sexual and reproductive health care they deserve; transyouth still struggling for bathrooms in high schools that insist upon gender binaries. And then Erica, self defined as a Puerto Rican femme lesbian, a senior in high school explained, “I am fine when I walk down the street alone; but when I’m with my girlfriend, police say, ‘I want to fuck both of you.’” And you could hear fingers snapping all around us.

“This survey is going out all over the country, and to Puerto Rico. One of the things we want to know is how young people experience injustice, how often and how they cope.” I offered that we wanted to build on research of Bruce McEwen (2000) who has documented how the neuro-science of injustice “gets under the skin” and makes us sick. So, I added, “We are going to list a bunch of experiences in a column, that might be considered unfair or unjust, and respondents will rate how stressful they find these experiences. What kinds of things should we list?” Hands went up:

- *No place to live
- *My family threw me out
- * Finding out you are HIV positive and having your family tell you to leave
- * Not being able to afford transportation to get to work
- * When I just tap my girlfriend’s nose in the hallway in school, or give her a quick kiss on the cheek, some security guard screams TOO MUCH PDA [public displays of attention] when the straight kids are basically having sex on the other side of the hall – and my mother gets a call!
- * Getting beat up in school, called a faggot and I get suspended or transferred ‘cause they say they can’t promise to keep me safe

And then Jay, whose preferred personal pronoun was THEY, raised a hand, and from under a baseball cap, sitting atop a full Afro, soft brown skin, welcoming smile, grey eyes, spoke, “Every time the police stop and frisk me, you know in parks or at the piers or even in my neighborhood, when they feel my breasts they get angry and beat me up. Can we put that on the survey?”

We spent two hours on how to ask about gender/sex categories (Do we ask about sex assigned at birth? Some applaud, and others yell out that the question itself is offensive), so the survey offers a long list of CHECK ALL THAT APPLY, after an open ended question that asks, What’s your Gender? And another What’s your sexuality? And

we have gathered, to date, almost 40 categories for each. Needless to say, this may be a thrilling moment for queer theory, but an empirically awkward moment for survey construction (see Tate & Pearson, 2016).

The tension between fluid subjectivities and politically strategic categorization sits at the heart of critical psychological research. The deconstruction of categories that have had serious political, personal, theoretical and legal consequence is fraught, as is the inscription of categories upon which some have found comfort, political power, sanctuary and others have confronted alienation and exclusion.

While critical PAR projects enter the difficult terrain of these debates, we don't necessarily resolve the epistemological problems of Othering. Here, the very people who have been the "objects" of inquiry are among the researchers who create the survey/interview instrument, and still/therefore/of course we run into enormous heterogeneity, intersectionality, dissent, conflicts, bruises, paper cuts and erasures within. To be clear, *the experience of exclusion does not create consensus* in the LGBTQ community any more than it does among Muslim American youth, school push outs, women in prison.... To the contrary, these discussions about biography, violence, identity, relationships, 'difference' can be painful – when young people find a space they have longed for, one that appears, on the surface to be affirming, but then they inevitably bump into comments that bruise, sting, trigger..... (www.whatsyourissue.com) -- but are crucial for reasons ethical, theoretical, epistemological and political.

In January, as the survey was still meandering across the 50 states, Guam and Puerto Rico, we brought activist research teams from ten communities around the country (California, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Texas, Mississippi and NY/NJ) to review the early data and design community portraits to create community narratives on policies that particularly impact LGBTQ youth. The young people will return to NYC the evening before the PRIDE march to perform and present their materials and we will gather more material on the politics and embodiments, solidarities and willful subjectivities of LGBTQ youth. At the end of the project we will produce a multi-generational White Paper on policy issues; youth graphic design/social media on the findings; policy briefs and performances of lives at the radical edge.

Radical marginality as Refraction in revolting times

"Tell the truth but tell it slant"

Emily Dickinson

In profoundly distressing times, when inequality gaps swell, when worlds diverge dramatically even across blocks or zip codes, when schools are more segregated than in the past; as protests dot the globe contesting economic, racial, immigration, gender, religious and sexuality based exclusions, the existential question for critical

psychologists asks to whom are we accountable? I have asked this before, usually rhetorically. But now I feel as if we have some answers.

We know, for instance, there is a rich basket of critical knowledge percolating in the margins, knowledge about survival, “difference” and the wounds of oppression, but also knowledge about how the spikes on the bottom of public institutions pierce the skin and smother souls of marginalized youth, even as they presume to protect the public good. We know, too, that social inquiry launched from the perch of power and privilege is fraught with unchecked distortions, a bias toward the downstream, erasure of structural causes and leaking - what Thomas Teo (2010) would call epistemological violence. And we know that scholarship on unequal outcomes, without theoretical attention to structure and history, will reverberate against the very victims we intend to support. Critical bifocality is a provisional design strategy to contextualize and theorize the deeply social psychological fabric of contemporary injustice.

Finally, to the question of epistemology and design, critical participatory work harvested in the messy folds of the borderlands can be a rich, if sometimes fraught, setting for refocusing critical scholarship toward critique, possibility and transformation, particularly when conceived in solidarity with social movements. At the end of this essay I am not sure I am satisfied with spatial metaphors like margin and center, being blown away by the grounded insights and care voiced by our LGBTQ youth researchers who are remarkably centered, even as they have been structurally exiled by so many institutions presumably designed for their own good. But it is clear that one obligation of critical bifocality is to re-inscribe the erased causes – historic and structural - to the framing of social inequalities and revive the sense of possibility for those who still believe in lost causes.

Critical bifocality takes up the difficult theoretical and empirical work of tracing circuits that connect flows of capital, bodies, ideas, affects, subjectivities and power, refracting the dominant story. Students who appear to be giving up on education are resituated as complex actors laboring at the structural intersection of a disinvested education system, a shrinking labor market, heightened criminal justice system and gentrification of urban housing market; Muslim American youth navigating violence in their native countries with violence in the U.S. narrate the psychological labors of negotiating hyphenated selves, in a lineage with Japanese American youth 50 years prior, revealing the strategic subjectivities deployed when a nation called “home” exiles them from within; and queer youth enable us to see just how provocatively desire and difference can propel structural precarity in school, home, work and with the criminal justice and immigration/deportation systems.

Neither dropouts, nor Muslim Americans nor queer youth can be understood outside the structural contingencies that impinge; it would be naïve to read their narratives as if they were wholly about these “categories” of young people, or worry that they embody “risk” while ignoring the historic circumstances, institutional betrayals

and quirky flexible subjectivities they bring to developmental moments when the very institutions supposed to protect them instead abandon, betray, exile.

Critical bifocality serves up a theory/method that requires a qualitative curating of evidence as assemblage; an alternative to the structure/agency split, a corrective to overdeterminism of a wholly structural focus, and a thickening of stories of “resilience” that psychologists are so fond of parading. In so doing, we theorize and simultaneously humanize the political and psychological work of young people who are the canaries in the mine of contentious economic, political, ethnic and sexual hierarchies in a shifting global context. With a sense of critical optimism, by interrogating and filling in the linkages that bond global to local, history to present, and elites and quasi-elites to marginalized communities, we might begin to understand the circuits of dispossession, but also the circuits of solidarity that need to be connected in the march toward social justice.

notes

(1) Of course you are thinking, and correctly, that these binaries are always too simple; the contradictions rich and provocative; who is “we?”; the historic specificities of Vienna, New York and France too huge to ignore. And history matters: the U.S. has the largest Black middle class in history; the cosmopolitan class is ethnically diverse. Yet Jodi Melamed would tell us that in the U.S., neoliberal multiculturalism has prevailed to contest ideologically and fortify materially conditions of racial stratification. “Diversity” at the top obscures the racialized and classed trajectories growing more and more brittle and over-determined, just below.

(2) *New York Times* columnist David Brooks writes in an Op Ed that the poor suffer from “anxieties of impotence” and he recommends the research on positive psychology and GRIT as an antidote to oppression: “As psychological research has shown, many people who feel powerless come to feel unworthy and become complicit in their own oppression.” Brooks ignores a substantial body of social psychological research documenting that most young people who have been subjected to state violence through aggressive policing, disinvestment, surveillance of Muslim communities, anti-immigration raids and school closings, disproportionately in communities of color, indeed feel betrayed by public institutions and in response they organize rich social movements.

(3) This commitment to studying those at the center extends to our sampling practices, and produces some comparable distortions. In a meta analysis conducted by Henrich, Hein and Norenzaya, *The weirdest people in the world*, we learn that

“behavioral scientists routinely publish broad claims about human psychology and behavior” based upon samples drawn almost entirely from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic societies which are, ironically, among the least representative populations for generalizing. Top journals of 6 areas of psychology, 2003 – 2007, 68% of subjects from US and 96% from WEIRD. So 96% of psychological samples come from countries with 12% of world’s population. A full 70% of all psychology citations come from the U.S.; 37% of chemistry. (j. Henrich, s., Heine, a. Norenzayan, June 2010, *the weirdest people in the world? Behavioral and brain sciences*, 33, 23, 61 – 74.

(4) among the significant exceptions see the work of Lisa Diamond, 2009; Stephen Russell et al 2014; Angela Irvine, 2010; Joe Kosciw at GLSEN, 2014; Charlotte Tate, 2016; Elizabeth Payne, 2015; Beverly Greene, 2008.

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