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In Pursuit of the Revolutionary-Not-Yet: Some Thoughts on Education Work, Movement Building, and Praxis

Denise Taliaferro Baszile
Miami University

A PRELUDE

Come to Jesus moment: coming clean and admitting failures; realizing the true weight or negative impact of a situation; an acknowledgement that one must get back to core values; moment of reassessing priorities. (http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=come-to-Jesus%20moment)

The other day, I walked into the bathroom that my children share. It was a mess, and I was appalled. The sink was nasty; the bathtub had a ring around it; the floor was dirty; and the toilet—oh my goodness gracious. I left the bathroom, stood in the hallway between their rooms, and hollered that it was time for what Big Mama would call a “come to Jesus meeting.” A come to Jesus meeting is when you call folks together to reflect, remember, reassess, refocus, and recommit to the work at hand. So tonight, whether you call on Jesus, Jehovah, Allah, Buddah, Mother Earth, the Orishas, another god, or no god at all, this is an opportunity for us as individuals and as a collective body to reflect, remember, reassess, refocus, and recommit to the struggle for justice, because for sure, there is plenty of work yet to do. So what I offer in this talk is not new information, so much as it is a call to remember and reconnect with the revolutionary potential of our work as educators, activists, and learners. My hope is that it is more inspirational than informational.

FALLING

Things falling apart is a kind of testing and also a kind of healing. We think that the point is to pass the test or to overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don’t really get solved. They come
together and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It’s just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy. (Chödrön, 1997, p. 8)

The world is fascinating, yet messy, complicated, and full of contradictions. As we navigate and negotiate the making of our world, I believe we are always on a journey toward justice. But sometimes we bump into moments when our world-making seems especially crazy, like we are definitely falling rather than climbing.

The first time I remember clearly registering the sensation of falling was in the months leading up to the 1980 presidential election between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. I was 12 years old and scared witless. I was living on the northwest side of Detroit between 7 and the now infamous 8 Mile roads. Born only a few months after the 1967 riots, the city had, for my entire life, been in perpetual downfall—mostly segregated by race and by income, unthinkable unemployment, gas crises, the rise of drug wars, lives lost too young, increasing violence, increased incarceration, the deterioration of Black counterspaces, and less than desirable and certainly not equitable educational conditions. In such an environment, despair, hopelessness, and powerlessness are always on your heels, always threatening your life, your wellbeing, and most importantly, your ability to imagine the revolutionary-not-yet. My family dealt with these circumstances by mapping out and hanging on to what Robin D. G. Kelly (2002) has called “freedom dreams.” With a family of labor, Civil Rights, and Black national activists, our feet were always firmly planted in struggle, and our hands were/are always reaching for the sun. My family’s freedom dreams included reparations and a sovereign Black nation, where we imagined a place free of the tyranny of Whiteness. In 1980, much of the activity and conversation in my family and in our political communities went something like this: If Ronald Reagan becomes president, Black people will be back in slavery. At the time, I lacked a sophisticated understanding of how hyperbole and metaphor function in African American folk theorizing. So while I thought it might be a little overblown, I was not all that sure. And having watched Roots at least twice by then, I thought I had sufficient reason to be scared witless. I have never been that scared about an election in my life—that is, until now, when once again the falling is palpable in a way that the climbing is not.

On the morning of November 9, 2016, I woke up a bit traumatized, but not at all surprised. For those of us who are astute historians, critical race scholars, or citizens old enough to register the rollercoaster ride that is racial progress and retrenchment in the United States, the 2016 election stayed right on course. We should have seen it coming as early as 2007, when then-Senator Barack Obama was running for the presidency, and the road to the White House was littered with racial epithets, vitriol, and a pathologic all its own. To be for sure, anything that remotely looks like racial progress in the United States has always been met with strident backlash fueled by White rage. Historian Carolyn Anderson, for instance, describes it this way:

The truth is, White rage has undermined democracy, warped the nation’s ability to compete economically, squandered billions of dollars on baseless incarceration, rendered an entire region sick, poor, and woefully undereducated, and left cities nothing less than decimated. All this havoc has been wreaked simply because African Americans [sic] wanted to work, get an education, live in decent communities, raise their families, and vote. (Anderson, 2016, p. 6)

Trump’s antics and ego, whether real or theatric, talked to and talked up White rage and left in its wake many wounded souls—raced, gendered, disabled, migrant, and more.
Unfortunately, in the grand scheme of things, the absurdity of the 2016 presidential election is but a reflection of much deeper problems haunting our prospects for better futures. In their book, *The Radical Imagination*, Max Havien and Alex Khasnabish (2014) suggest that we are in the midst of what Patrick Reinsborough calls “a slow motion apocalypse” or a moment in our world-making where global capitalism has unleashed a gradually unfolding collection of cascading crises: ecological collapse; energy, food, and water shortages; humanitarian nightmares in war zones; neocolonial exploitation zones and disaster capitalist “sacrifice zones;” and the less tangible, but no less terrifying, growth of massive social alienation and dislocation, along with its cruel medicines—militarism, addictions, fundamentalisms, racism, xenophobia, and social violence. (Havien & Khasnabish, 2014, p. 83)

These dynamics, of course, are also played out in educational systems across the world as they are designed to shore up the status quo, to shore up our hyper investments in a free market mentality, global White supremacy, and an infinite state of war. These are dangerous times not just because they landscape inequitable distribution of resources, representation, and power, but also because they inhabit bodies in affective ways. They distort relations within people and between people, who then come to understand themselves as incapable of acting/being/moving—in any true sense—against interlocking systems of oppression and the cascading crises in their wake. If ever there was a time in desperate need of revolutionary change, it is now.

As a community of educators, researchers, activists, and learners who are trying to imagine a world beyond these dynamics and in ways that promote equity, sustainability, diversity, and well-being for all community members, it is incumbent upon us to ask ourselves what kind of education work does this moment call for? Many of my colleagues will answer this question by calling for more resources for schools, more input into educational policy, more critiques on schooling, or even more democracy; I am not so inclined. Although I think all of these strategies are of relative importance to the overall project of justice and wellbeing through education, some of us have to also be thinking beyond the pragmatics, beyond the practical and toward the revolutionary-not-yet. We must ask, then, not what should democratic education look like, but rather what could education look like, and what could our world look like if we centered justice, love, community, and wellbeing in our work?

**Education Work**

Education will transform the world. Self-education will transform education. (Abundantlee, 2016, p. 3)

Education is a powerful political force in any society. Although we have lots of fanciful purposes for it, its one tried-and-true purpose has been to inculcate the people in the ways of the dominant economic, social, cultural, and political milieu. It does this work explicitly, implicitly, and relentlessly. This is mainstream education work, and it can only be disrupted, derailed, or redirected by tapping into its revolutionary potential (Freire, 1970). Education, in revolutionary terms, can be engaged as a counter-hegemonic force, but to do so on any significant level would require
us—educators, activists, learners concerned about social justice—to rethink or to remember a few things.

Every morning, I read a passage from a little book entitled *I Love, Therefore I Am* (Abundantlee, 2016). One of my favorite quotes from this book says this: “Education will transform the world and self-education will transform education” (p. 3). I love this quote, and I chant it to myself at least once, if not several times, a day. It is my way of trying to avoid getting caught up in the unproductive and the reproductive thinking that thwarts the revolutionary potential of education work. And yet, distractions abound. Sometimes, for instance, we think too narrowly by subsuming the work of education into the project of schooling. But the quote is a reminder that education, not schooling, will transform the world. And as such, our energy, focus, and commitments to educational justice and wellbeing cannot be relegated to school improvement or simply helping students, teachers, and administrators do well in school. Schooling—as we have come to form and reform it—is an institution of the state designed to maintain the existing social order (Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Shujaa, 1994) and not likely to be a site of radical change in more than a school here or a school there. To this end, we have to engage in education as a more expansive and dynamic project, one that certainly includes but is not limited to rethinking schooling. In fact, it could be that thinking more about educational possibility and creating more educational opportunity outside of school (alongside the important work in schools and on schools) is the only viable way to significantly transform what is happening inside of schools. Sometimes, for another example, in our analyses of structures, dynamics, issues, and policies, we see the contours of the systemic injustices, but we fail to keep in our sights on how these play on and play out in the intricacies of textured, singular and collective lives. In this way, the alienating processes we seek to understand are reemphasized in our attempts at understanding. But again, the quote is a reminder that the self is not simply determined, but also determining in its capacity to learn and relearn and its capacity to generate ideas, energy, action, fear, relations, love, resistance, and imagination. It is still the basic unit of a community and a coalition, and thus the self is where the responsibility for transformation lies. For a final example, sometimes we talk and write and invest in singular, discrete solutions that we share primarily in gated communities, where we participate in knowledge-policing more than in the sharing and co-creation of knowledge. Ultimately, the quote is a reminder that education is the primary process through which revolutionary change is made possible, but such change calls for more than discrete solutions. It calls for a movement.

**Movement Methodology**

Storytelling can change the world. Reclaiming history, cleaning up river waters, making girls into teachers, fighting against racism and xenophobia—these projects are too important to leave to the politicians and their cronies. Ordinary people all over the world turn to artful storytelling, to make their most indelible mark on the cause. (Solinger, Fox, & Irani, 2010, p. 8)

At this point in our history, we know that revolutionary change for justice has only ever come by way of social movements. So if we are serious about justice work, then it seems appropriate to suggest that we should be serious about movement building. So the loose (admittedly still in its formative stages) argument I am trying to work through here is: For those of us who are committed to conceptualizing our education work as social justice work, what strategies,
strengths, and challenges might we realize if we understand the essence of our work as movement building?

Movement building, to be clear, is the process by which we inspire and activate a sense of collective courage and agency in pursuit of a more just state of affairs. Unfortunately, because popular media often project social movements as if they emerge out of some kind of spontaneous combustion of outrage, we miss the backstories and the important lessons they can teach us about effective movement methodology. There are at least three critical steps in movement building work: identify the problem with the people, inspire more people to get involved with addressing the problem, and develop strategy from protest to praxis. Of course, there are other things like being persistent, patient, and open to learning from failures. But for now, I will only elaborate on the three critical steps mentioned, and in so doing will also address the possible lessons and challenges they pose for our community of social justice educators.

The first critical step in the movement building process is to clearly identify the problem. This requires substantive dialogue with people who are not only enduring the negative effects of the situation, but who see or have been trying to understand the nature of the problem/s. The purpose of the dialogue is not simply to identify the problem in terms of its visceral impact, but it is also to enhance understanding of the development of the problem within the larger historical, sociocultural, and political contexts, which give it meaning and tenacity. Identifying the problem also means articulating the problem in such a way that its injustice is evident. For instance, the problem posed by abolitionists was not simply stated as slavery is wrong, but rather in a land where all men are said to be created equal, slavery is both immoral and illogical. For those of us who are doing the majority of our education work in, through and against the university, identifying the problem/s is usually a strength, though some might argue that we could do more to collaborate with communities in this process.

The next critical step in movement building methodology is to galvanize the people. This is where we, as educators and activists, could learn a crucial lesson. If we look back to past social movements that resulted in radical change toward more justice, we would have to take note of the fact that well-reasoned research—although indispensible—does not by itself galvanize the people. People do not act simply because they know that something is unjust; they act because feelings are stirred. For all political struggles require emotional work (Ahmed, 2004), which demands intentional engagement of the mind and the body. Before antislavery efforts became the abolitionist movement, for example, they were taken up by all White and male societies that used rational arguments organized into legal briefs and proposals to Congress about why slavery was wrongheaded. These efforts were largely unsuccessful. It was Black abolitionists’ insistence on taking the issue to the masses and building cross-cultural coalitions—through pamphleteering, engaging in public debate, telling stories about life in slavery, and providing financial resources and content to publications, such as William Lloyd Garrison’s The Liberator—that transformed anti-slavery efforts into a cross-cultural mass movement (Newman, 2002). The building of the civil rights movement was also driven—not primarily or necessarily by the reasoned arguments of northern liberals—but mainly by the efforts of religious institutions, who used biblical motifs and spirituals to tell stories about the continued injustices faced by African American and other non-White citizens (Chapell, 2004).

Undoubtedly, storytelling in various forms has historically been a powerful strategy for calling people to the work of movement building. The storytelling process, writes Davis (2002), “engages people in a communicative relationship. Through identification and ‘cocreation’ of a story, the
storyteller and reader/listener create a ‘we’ involving some degree of affective bond and a sense of solidarity, told and retold, your story is my story” (p. 19). Unfortunately for those of us who do our education work within, through and against academia, neither story work nor emotional work is recognized as a legitimate part of knowledge generation. They are often seen as getting in the way of objectivity and limiting our capacity to think clearly. So although we produce and have access to relevant data, we often fail to couch that data within compelling stories that ignite public debate and call people to action.

The final and most complicated step in movement building is advancing the work from the stage of protest to praxis. Protest is important, because it exposes an injustice, but protest alone, particularly in the current moment, is insufficient (G. L. Boggs & Kurashige, 2011; White, 2016). Watching the ebb and flow of notable social protests in the last decade—namely Occupy Wall Street and #BlackLivesMatter—it has been quite evident and disheartening to see peaceful protestors attacked by state authorities (once again) and also to realize that the justice being demanded would certainly be denied. The powers that be have become increasingly willing to wait us out, wear us out, or wipe us out. Watching the spectacles was a stark reminder that the more co-opted into the capitalist system we have become, the more difficult it is to assert resistance to the injustice it spawns (J. Boggs, 1970). Our protest politics are suffering from a kind of arrested development, unable to move beyond displays of public outrage and the statements of support we like to write and circulate as academics, efforts mostly based on the assumption that authorities and representatives are obligated to heed or even recognize our demand and dissent.

In The End of Protest: A New Playbook for Revolution, Occupy co-founder Micah White (2016) says this of our current situation:

> The preconditions for revolution are present: income inequality, disaffection of intellectuals burdened by educational debt, corruption among elites, and inefficiency in government. A ruling class that has lost self-confidence, looming financial collapse, and the excessive use of force against rebels whenever protests occur. But power has adapted to the approaches that have dominated activism for the past half-century or more. The old tactics must be abandoned. The old assumptions about how change is made are leading us astray. This is a problem for everyone who wishes for a better world in his or her lifetime. (White, 2016, pp. 40–41)

In other words, we need a new gameplan, a new theory of revolutionary change, and new tactics to boot. I suppose there will emerge as many possibilities as there are thinkers concerned about the way to more just futures. For my part, I am interested in thinking about how we—as educators—may play a role in shifting the energy from protest to praxis.

**From Revolution to Revolutionary Praxis**

> Revolution is the only thing, the only power that ever worked out freedom for any people. (Phillips, cited in White, 2016, p. 40)

> Although some people conflate revolution with rebellion—burning buildings, riots, protests, and the like, for others—especially academics—any talk of revolution usually ends up entangled in debates about the efficacy of Marx’s ideas—debates about whether there can be an overthrow of
the power elite in an advanced capitalist economy; debates about whether the focus of revolutionary change should be classism or racism; debates about whether revolutions are more historically determined or whether human agency plays a central role; and debates about whether revolutionary change requires violence. Whatever people imagine it to be, these days it is mostly talked about as a failure of the past and not a realistic possibility in the future, particularly in the West.

Listening to others has, no doubt, challenged me to both situate and rattle my own understandings of revolutionary change. Growing up in a family engaged in political and community activism over generations, revolution, for me, was squarely associated with the everyday struggles we engaged in the here and now, whether that was participating in campaigns to keep the dollar in the ‘hood, protesting this or that injustice around the city, participating in rallies to free political prisoners, or volunteering to teach in Saturday schools. What I gathered over the years from the rhetoric and actions of my elders is that we are always in the process of making revolution. Although publicly marked at times by rebellions, these were not and are not the ultimate work of revolutionary change. Rebellions, as J. Boggs and Boggs (1974) argue, are just as incomplete as they are important:

Rebellions are important because they represent the standing up of the oppressed. Rebellions break the threads that have been holding the system together. They shake up old values so that relations between individuals and groups within society are unlikely to ever be the same again. But rebels see themselves and call on others to see them mainly as victims. They do not see themselves as responsible for reorganizing society, which is what the revolutionary social forces must do in a revolutionary period. (J. Boggs & Boggs, 1974, p. 16)

Beyond rebellion, then, there is still always the ongoing, everyday work of building a community, a world where relationships are not driven solely by material self-interest, but where other things like basic human dignity, self-knowledge, and communal relations that sustain us literally and spiritually matter, even and perhaps especially in the face of the forces that deny their relevance. To this end, I am always surprised to hear people still talking about revolution as an event, as the overthrow of the power elite, as the work of the few and not the many, as the end to capitalism. These ideas alone are indefatigably incapable of helping us to address the complex social, political, cultural, and economic realities of the United States and its investment in global domination. We are living in a time when there is not a problem but a complex of interrelated problems and in a time in which we need to shift our thinking from revolution to revolutionary praxis.

This shift toward revolutionary praxis, I think, is best expressed in James and Grace Lee Boggs’ Revolution and Evolution in the 20th Century (1974) and Grace Lee Boggs and Kurashige’s The Next American Revolution (2011), in which they use dialectics to keep us thinking about the evolution of revolutions and the significance of revolutionary moments in pushing us toward the next evolutionary stage of humanity. The Boggs study past revolutions not simply as an intellectual exercise, but as part of the process of mapping a way forward. Not only do they make insightful distinctions between rebellion and revolution, but they also manage to challenge anachronistic ideas about the next revolutionary period. Ultimately, they consider what we can learn from past revolutions without being arrested in or by them. The Boggs’ analysis renders a long list of circumstances/desires that have inspired past revolutions but are unlikely, as they argue, to inspire the next American Revolution. They make two particularly insightful points: (a) The next American revolution is likely to be the first to compel us to give up, rather than fight for, more
material goods/resources; and (b) it will also require us to focus on the political and not simply the economic development of the masses. Both are poignant indications that the biggest challenge we will face going into the next revolutionary period will be ourselves and our willingness to reclaim our sense of agency from the clutches of global White supremacy and its concomitant ills—neoliberalism, imperialism, patriarchy. These are pedagogies of empire that have profoundly disciplined our thinking about self, others, and what is and is not possible in the work of world-making. Reclaiming ourselves from the clutches of empire will undoubtedly require more than a charismatic event. It will require a “revolution of values” (G. L. Boggs & Kurashige, 2011, p. 10), a reckoning with the self in relation to the collective and the common good.

In her last full-length manuscript before passing away at 100 years old, Grace Lee Boggs and Kurashige (2011) continues her thinking on revolution in the context of her ongoing work toward grassroots revitalization in Detroit. In The Next American Revolution, G. L. Boggs (2011) builds on the work in Revolution and Evolution (J. Boggs & Boggs, 1974) by applying its insights to the current neoliberal moment, in which calls for more democracy are simply not enough. In fact, she says, “Politics as usual—debate and argument, even voting—are no longer sufficient. Our system of representative democracy, created by a great revolution, must now itself become the target of revolutionary change” (G. L. Boggs & Kurashige, 2011, p. 34). And revolutionary change, Boggs goes on to emphasize,

I refer to Boggs’ two-sided transformational process as revolutionary praxis; it is the process through which we become the change we want to see. There are many examples of this kind of work happening in the shadows of gentrification in communities across the country that have been devastated in the wake of empire. We see them in various grassroots revitalization projects, such as urban gardens for food security, independent and chartered community schools with curricula centered on community building, summer camps and after-school programs organized by neighbors and focused on improving individual and collective wellbeing, and the proliferation of nonprofits designed to activate and support such efforts. Interestingly, I see such programs igniting all over the city of Detroit. I can only presume that these revolutionary praxis projects are taking place there because the residents have had to take action, as the city’s economic and political devastation over the last several decades has severely impaired its ability to effectively and efficiently serve its citizens. Though it is inspiring to witness, it makes one wonder if we have to descend to such devastation before we can call up the sense of agency, thought, and programs that work to transform ourselves and our institutions.

A few years ago, I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to take a group of students to visit Grace Lee Boggs at the Boggs Center on Detroit’s Eastside. She was 96 years old at the time, and gave me and my students a lot to think about. She talked a great deal not about educational inequality, but about the overall need to change the way we think about education and the way we do schooling, which she basically saw—in its current form—as alienating at best. At the time, she and her team of community members (activists, educators, parents, etc.)
were near to opening the James and Grace Lee Boggs School, a model of place-based education, where children learn all subject matter through doing community improvement projects. Grace was adamant that transformation in education and transformation in society had to go hand-in-hand and must be initiated at the grassroots level and not as a mandate from state or federal authorities. This was activated not only in the effort to imagine and then realize the school, but in the efforts of the center to engage the community in a variety of educational experiences that nurture the roots of the grass.

I walked away from the Boggs Center that day, inspired to keep up with the progress of the school and thinking a lot about what lessons I could take back to my own work in the university and the local communities that surround it. Although the school model was exciting, it was clear to me that the more important takeaway from the Boggs visit and the Boggs’ work over decades in Detroit was their engagement of revolutionary praxis, which embodied at its most demonstrative, many of the qualities necessary for making transformative change toward more just futures. These included an investment in dialectical thinking (working through cycles of advancing reflection and action) because the work is always evolving and requires us to rethink our circumstances; radical imagining (wondering not what should be, but what could be) because we must know not only what is we are fighting against, but also what we are fighting for (Kelley, 2002); community building (building all kinds of capacity through relationships) because courage and agency are ultimately a collective phenomenon; an ethic of self-determination (belief in the people’s ability and responsibility to make change toward justice) because freedom cannot be given, it must be taken; and love-ability (working from a place of agape love and not fear), because that is the only road to becoming a more human being. It was also clear to me that the work was hard and long, but it has also been inspiring, invigorating, and contagious—an affirmation that the transformation happens in the process of the struggle.

CLIMBING

After climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. (Mandela, 1994, p. 751)

As educators who actively make an effort to keep the messy, complicated, and urgent question of justice on our minds and in our sights, we might do good to think of our work—whatever it is—as movement building. We consider our work as movement building not because we are out there pounding the streets or crafting yet another statement of support on behalf of the hurting or healing of comrades, but because we can cultivate the qualities of revolutionary praxis in our own lives and work. We try every chance we get to pass it on through our teaching, leading, building, organizing, and through our ability to not just demand otherwise but to do otherwise. To think of our work as movement building means we refuse to turn the entirety of our education over to the state. It means we imagine and engage pedagogy that centers dialectics, imagination, self-determination, community building and love-ability. It means we craft and tell the compelling story about education and justice in the public domain. It means we invest in possibilities beyond the present and beyond what seems at this moment evident. When we do these things, revolutionary change will not be far behind.
NOTE

1. *Big Mama* is the name I use to refer to the wisdom of my mother, grandmothers, aunts, and other mothers.

REFERENCES


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