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As the Tide Turns on the Violence of U.S. Neoliberal Education: Un-organized white-led activism, from abstract critique to nonviolent resistance

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Abstract
This is a story about the language and role of justice, violence, and nonviolent resistance in contemporary activism against neoliberal policies in U.S. education. Through a description of meetings of “un-organized,” white-led groups of education activists over the course of eight years, this article traces shifts in the white progressive activist imagination, during a time of broad national shift in the United States from wholesale public embrace of neoliberal education reform to a more fractured and contentious field. Specifically, this article explores white progressive activists’ shifts from analyzing injustice in education to talking about structural violence and engaging with nonviolent resistance. The findings of this inquiry speak to the role of collective memory, discursive power, and the capacities of a particular U.S. white public to recognize, engage with, relate to, and appropriate Latino/Latina and black students’ and parents’ experiences and analyses of violence in education.

Keywords
neoliberalism, education, activism, race

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Introduction: Resistance in the Era of “Reform IS Justice”

How does identification of and resistance to structural violence develop in a context where both the violence and the targeted publics are muddled with ideological and cultural fractures? This is a story of changes to activism on the particularly challenging field of U.S. neoliberal education reform, in a particularly interesting period of shifting political-cultural relationships between the various publics that might resist the violence such reform entails. First, let us get our bearings within the field.

Education reform in the United States in the 21st century has been nothing short of Orwellian. The 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which has since 1965 served as the mechanism for mobilizing each era’s federal education agenda, signaled the advent of this brave new era of what I call “Reform IS Justice” (after Orwell’s dystopian novel Nineteen Eighty-Four, in which the Ministry of Truth of a fascist state asserts: Slavery IS Freedom. War IS Peace. Ignorance IS Strength.). Such signals can be easily seen in both the Act’s rhetoric and its policy. Over-the-top rhetorical flourishes toward justice run from the very title of the Act (No Child Left Behind) through the framing text (my favorite example is the Act’s framing commitment to combat “the soft bigotry of low expectations”). The most obviously and illogically hyperbolic component of the Act, again invoking justice, was its demand—backed up by the full force of federal policy’s crudely apportioned carrots and (mostly, in this case) sticks—that 100% of U.S. students must prove proficient in reading and math by 2014. Failure in making appropriate progress toward this goal—that is, failure to make “adequate yearly progress” toward universal success, according to students’ test scores—automatically triggered sanctions on schools, up to and including the closing of the school. Each of these sanctions—each of the “failures” of public schools—entailed a greater amount of public funding shifting from public to privately-contracted institutions, such that for private companies vying for contracts, the incentive was to make failure profitable (Koyama, 2010). Reform IS Justice.

The structural, symbolic, and even direct violence that characterized the first ten years of NCLB-style neoliberal education reform is now widely acknowledged, even by a great many of those policy scholars who previously heralded or at least partially welcomed the policy regime (most prominetly, Ravitch, 2011). In the name of high expectations for all students, 2001-2010 saw the intensification of zero-tolerance disciplinary policies that were initially disseminated in the 1990s (Wald and Losen, 2003), the intensification of police and security presence, and the resulting push-
out/dropout and ultimate incarceration of increasing numbers of youth of color (Nolan, 2011). In the name of improving teacher quality, 2001-2010 saw the forceful dismantling of teachers’ collective power in many districts, the displacement of veteran teachers, the destruction of school systems that were controlled by communities of color, and an overall assault on experienced teachers of color through disaster capitalism (Buras, 2011; Pedroni, 2011). In the name of increasing opportunities through innovation and choice, 2001-2010 saw the shocking rates of school closures and private corporate takeovers of public schools in districts with majorities of students of color (Buras, 2014; Jack & Sludden, 2013; Lipman & Haines, 2007). In the name of accountability, 2001-2010 saw increases in state and local mandates to use standardized test instruments and aligned curriculum to drive the sorting of students, schools, and teachers, in “neo-Taylorized” fashion, into high-stakes categories of success and failure (Au, 2011). Each of these policy developments involved unprecedented opportunities for profit and control for the private education industry, the funneling of hundreds of billions of dollars in public education dollars from public control to private control and, in many cases, profit (Picciano and Spring, 2013). Each of these developments had historical precedent, to be sure, but this was the era that wove the policies tightly together.

What should be interesting to those who study violence is that this policy regime’s primary decade was characterized by such thorough institutionalization and intensification of myriad forms of violence in public education without significant mass resistance or widespread public outcry. How could there be an increase in structural, symbolic, and direct violence wrought by educational institutions and policies over the course of at least fifteen years -- violence which affected (albeit in quite disparate ways) 90% of school-aged youth in the United States as well as their families and teachers -- without a viable mass movement taking shape? In order to address such a broad question, in this paper I drill down to local instances of unremarkable activism, to the places where resistance largely failed to emerge. First, I ask, what did it look like on a local level for the discourse of “Reform IS Justice” to hold sway for so long? That is, what did it look like for resistance to fail to take hold? Second, now that there are clear signs of a growing popular movement against almost all aspects of the neoliberal education regime, what does this anti-violence movement look like in its local inchoate formations? Specifically, what does initial un-organized “involvement” in resistance to the highly racialized forms of violence of neoliberal educational policy look like? Finally, what might the effect be of a prominent newly-configured racial justice anti-violence movement—that is, the emerging Black Lives Matter movement—on local resistance to neoliberal education in the United States?
In this article, I look at interactions of unsupported, relatively un-organized parent-centered activist gatherings over eight years, straddling what I suggest has been a “tide-turning” period in activism against the structural violence of U.S. education reform: 2006-2014. This is a study of an era during which structural, symbolic, and direct violence in education did not substantively change, but during which there was a palpable shift in public consciousness and discourse about such violence. The first half of this period, from approximately 2006-2010, was characterized by near-hegemonic public acceptance of the “Reform IS Justice” ideology of the NCLB era. An increasingly fractured political field represented by a far more diverse set of public and activist discourses has characterized the second half of this period, from 2010-2014. These recent years have involved growing national resistance to many the NCLB era’s golden calves (most prominently, Teach for America and charter schools). Activists have also successfully brought broader public attention to the violence wrought by some of the core policies and practices—high stakes testing and highly punitive disciplinary and policing practices—that have characterized the era for many urban school districts, the majority of whose students are black and Latino/a and live in poverty.

I take a fine-grained, punctuated approach to this eight-year period, looking not at the broad strokes of policies and their effects but at interactions amongst people who have come together during this period for the purpose of dissent or resistance. And I do not look either at a representative sample of dissenters, nor at the most successful cases. Instead, I focus on inchoate, what I refer to as “un-organized,” groups, led primarily by parents of public-school youth and not backed up by any professional organization, network, or already-constituted movement.

This paper begins with a description of the policies and violence that have characterized what I refer to as neoliberal education reform. I then contextualize the “un-organized” group meetings that form the core of my analysis by distinguishing such groups from the many well-organized/organizing projects that have so successfully mobilized parents and youth—mostly low-income, mostly black and Latino/Latina—to create local pockets of resistance and democratic control over the past twenty years, defying and in some cases holding at bay or even reversing local manifestations of federal educational policy. I then turn to a brief description of my research methods, followed by a thick description of a meeting of an un-organized group of dissenters that represents the pre-movement years, followed by analysis. I describe briefly the “turn” to national movements against reform, followed by a thick description of a second un-organized meeting in the wake of these movements. Finally, I conclude with an analysis of what these shifts mean for awareness of and
resistance to structural, institutionalized violence within the historical and contemporary racial landscape of the United States.

**Contemporary School Reform in the United States, Context and Outline**

Public leaders and activists of all stripes have long flocked to educational policy as a powerful method for changing society. Thus, public education has been undergoing “reform”—some form of systemic change—since its inception. In several eras since the initiation of public schooling in the mid-nineteenth century, U.S. public school policy has served as a major lever of social change in the public imagination, and education has often been over-coded with political, cultural, and economic significance. Between the 1870s and the Progressive era, schools were seen as a tool for economic reform and the production of a modern industrial working class; linguistic, religious, and cultural assimilation (the production of American citizens out of diverse immigrant groups); expansion of intellectual/professional opportunities for women; the proliferation of new management models into public service provision; and a means of controlling crime and violence in fast-growing urban centers (Kaestle, 1983). Unique amongst state institutions, the social-symbolic meaning of public school—its very purpose, the reason that it should exist as a public institution—has never been fixed in any sense. Public school reform has often served as a means, if not the means par excellence, for projecting a wide variety of social reform ideals, ideologies, and agendas onto the state.

The year 1983 marked the beginning of the struggle to define the post-civil-rights era of reform in U.S. public education. The federal report “A Nation At Risk” in that year called for a new era of federal, state, and local education reform to address the problem of “failing schools.” The report constructed failing schools as a compelling problem in the national interest, tying school failure to late-Cold-War anxieties about U.S. global economic and political power. Progressive education advocates were initially glad to see education become a prominent part of the national agenda after some years of struggle for attention to problems of underfunding in the wake of the civil rights struggles that characterized previous era of federal interest in schools. But this excitement quickly gave way to a new form of struggle: instead of arguing that U.S. education is in crisis, progressives from various quarters began a long effort to re-focus attention, re-define the crisis. Thus began twenty years of critical educational researchers and activist attempts to interrogate and intervene in strong federal education reform discourses. Between 1983 and 2000, critical education scholars and activists worked to counter the discourse of *excellence* (following on *A Nation At Risk*) with admonitions toward *equity* and *justice*. The federal No Child Left
Behind Act of 2001, as described above, was firmly (and absurdly) situated in a discourse of justice.

What I herein call neoliberal education reform involves a diverse set of policies knit together by an even more diverse set of ideologies, a non-unified politics that Apple (2001) identified at the turn of the current century as the “New Right” coalition. The reason I use the term “neoliberal education reform” here is partly to distinguish the current era of reform from past efforts toward systemic change. The current era of reform, the central elements of which are glossed below, has been driven largely by private corporations and alliances of school systems with private companies. Some of this “driving” has been direct, as in the case of Pearson and other multi-national corporations that are part of the growing education industrial complex, and the lobbying for these policies by the corporate-interest-led American Legislative Exchange Commission (Andersen and Donchik, 2014). In other cases the role of private industry has been solely one of functional beneficiary (at least as far as I am aware), as in the case of expanding public funds to build private prisons, which benefit from school discipline policies that have resulted in higher incarceration rates in an era of falling violent crime rates. I am not suggesting that there is a direct political conspiracy; indeed, much corporate advocacy for the current era of educational policy occurs openly. But whether secret or open, there has been a remarkable and undeniable shift since 2001 in the power of private companies to shape and benefit from the “hidden markets” created by neoliberal educational policy (Burch 2009).

The violence of neoliberal education reform is not always, or even usually, named as violence in the critical literature on educational policy; like the reforms it criticizes, this literature has largely maintained its focus on the language of “justice.” Nevertheless, the structural, direct, and symbolic violent effects of the various components of neoliberal education reform policy are quite well documented. An outline of the various strands of neoliberal educational policy regime, including the forms of violence that it has produced, follows:

1. The **surveillance and policing of the bodies of students of color** (direct violence) to an extent that significantly affects the likelihood of students of color both being pushed out of schools and entering the prison system (structural violence) (Lipman, 2009; Fine et al, 2003);
2. The **control, monitoring, disciplining, and de-skilling of the labor of teachers**, focused disproportionately on those who teach poor students and students of color (structural violence) (Barrett, 2009);
3. **Decreasing civic control over the governance of public education**,
disproportionately affecting the ability of poor parents and parents of color to have a voice in shaping the schools in their community and manifesting in increased privatization of school systems and closings of public schools (structural violence) (Lipman, 2011);

4. **Exclusion of meaningful curriculum focused on diverse knowledges and traditions**, enacted through a narrowing of curriculum that effectively mitigates much of the multicultural curricular progress of the late twentieth century (symbolic violence) (Berliner, 2009; Sleeter, 2005);

5. An **expanding policy system of standardized testing and attendant curricular mandates** that have come to be used as key tools to mobilize each of the above strands, and the expansion of which confers direct profits (in the form of public funds) on privately-held corporations (Hursh, 2005).

The accountability and market-producing regimes that characterize K-12 education reform (and, increasingly, higher education) in the United States are neither unique to the United States nor limited to educational institutions. It is in U.S. education, however, that neoliberal policies have found some of their fullest and quickest manifestations. Such policies not only infuse the education sector with managerial governance mechanisms and audit-focused logics, but also institutionalize mechanisms for shifting massive quantities of public funds to privately-held corporations. Accountability regimes arrived on the educational scene in the U.S. in earnest in the mid- to late 1990s, based on earlier state-based experiments (Fuhrman, 1999). In 2001, the federal government implemented policies that enabled a massive diversion of funds from public to private control, from school district- and building-level budgets to contracted services. Such contracted services now include everything from total school district management and operations in some cases, to charter school management and operations, to the services that functionally siphon public education funds that affect nearly every public school in the nation in some way, including: test-making, test field-testing, test preparation, curriculum and instructional material development (for alignment with tests), “supplemental educational services” (such as tutoring), alternative teacher certification, contracted professional development, remedial and intervention programs for students as well as schools, data management, and more. The education industry has exploded over the past decade (Burch, 2009).

What have received far less attention are the day-to-day experiences of such shifts. Between the generation that attended public schools in the 1980s and the current generation, day-to-day experiences of urban public schooling are almost unrecognizable. In the 1980s, what Jonathan Kozol famously called “savage
inequalities,” or education resource disparities between suburban white-dominated and inner-city mostly black and Latino/Latina schools, were the core concern of educational activists. Today, the resource issue has become less a question of equity than one of governance. In short, test-based accountability, standardization, disciplinary policy, and corporate power have changed every anthropologically salient category of meaning related to diverse experiences of schooling over the past twenty years. They have changed time, hierarchy, and space. They have changed the role of the individual in relation to the institution, and the roles of actors outside the institution. Neoliberal policies have altered the political, economic, and symbolic structures of power, and ultimately the affective experiences of schooling, for diverse students, teachers, and parents who encounter public schools. As we will see, however, neoliberal policies have altered the experience of schooling in different ways for different communities. Despite intersecting layers of symbolic, structural, and direct violence embedded in contemporary educational reform regimes in the United States, this country has been remarkably slow to grow a social movement capable of overturning this policy regime. It is certainly not the case that outrage over the various forms of violence wrought by privatized and corporatized education is not capable of capturing any public’s imagination. Chile saw mass movements related to education reform and austerity in 2009. Mexico has seen several waves of mass mobilizations of teachers against contemporary neoliberal reforms since they were introduced in 2008. Quebec saw the initiation of mass movements in 2011 in relation to relatively modest austerity policies. Even the UK witnessed mass student movements against austerity policies that affected college students. But U.S. communities have encountered an increasingly violent educational system without significant mass resistance.

The educational reform industry, for its part, put a great deal of capital into cementing the ideology of “Reform IS Justice” in the U.S. public imagination. In many of the ancillary private initiatives and philanthropic programs that have characterized neoliberal education reform, the language of justice has also been aligned with the language of neoliberal reform. These include Teach for America and the many other initiatives to “save” children from failing teachers, “no excuses” charter schools such as Success Academy, and the efforts of the popular film Waiting for Superman to dramatize the “injustice” done by teachers’ unions and the need for choice- and accountability-based reform and business-sector leadership and solutions. In the name of justice, the reform juggernaut managed during the first decade of the 2000s to utterly enthrall the nation with its argument for accountability-based, corporate-innovation-led reform.
Community-Based Organizing for Educational Justice

There is growing documentation of the power of community organizing to shape educational policy and practice. A burgeoning literature, supported by foundations and professional academic groups, has begun to demonstrate through case studies, cross-site analyses, and professional networks the power of organizing a base toward a more participatory and democratic structure for education. Local community organizing coalitions in the United States have built sustained, participatory grassroots parent-led groups that address local educational policy concerns from the Bronx (Fabricant, 2010) to Oakland (Dyrness, 2011) to Denver (Hosang, 2006). Furthermore, while I am far more hesitant than Shirley (2009) to make claims about increases in substantive community organizing without significantly more ethnographic engagement with these groups, I agree with him that there has been an explosion of discourse, funding, research interest, and training activity related to community organizing and education over the past ten years.

Community organizing is a particular approach to education activism. Although it is not represented by a single model, there are characteristics that differentiate this approach from other approaches. In the introduction to a volume of case studies of community organizing in education, Warren and Mapp (2011) describe the approach succinctly:

Organizing groups do the patient, long-term work to build the capacity and leadership of people to make change in their communities and schools. They teach people the skills and knowledge necessary to bring residents of their communities together, identify issues of pressing concern, research those issues to build an agenda for action, build alliances with other groups, negotiate with public officials, and collaborate with educators and other institutional agents to create and implement new policies and practices. (p. 6)

Community organizing success stories are inspiring for would-be activists, and there are many reasons to herald community organizing as a powerful means of struggling toward democratic school reform. But this emerging literature also reveals something important about community organizing in education: its success is far from spontaneous. When community organizing groups become powerful players in educational systems, they have inevitably invested many years and copious community resources in building such power. Community organizing success is built on a great deal of professional as well as local wisdom, and is usually supported by
professional networks, institutions, or at least consistent and dedicated leaders and dedicated organizers who continually build and maintain the relationships and capacities for people to build power to affect the structures that affect their communities.

The infrastructure of grassroots activism and social movements is generally less formalized and apparent than the infrastructure of professional services and nonprofit advocacy (even as such activism often takes place alongside one or another). Grassroots movements do not often have development directors or annual reports -- both ubiquitous in traditional advocacy and service non-profit organizations in the United States. They do not usually have official communications teams or research divisions. “Infrastructure” for community organizing looks like structured, participatory meetings and consistent, high-quality training and mentorship for new leaders. It looks like fairly organic leadership teams, whose status in the movement is based not on official position but on relationships. It looks like organizers who have worked on the same project in the same community for a decade or more, individuals who, despite generally holding neither powerful institutional positions nor official credentials, nonetheless hold the center of local movements.

Furthermore, the communities within which organizing has become a powerful force for educational justice in the United States are predominantly low-income African American and Latino/Latina communities. Community organizing has not been as effective a tool for mobilizing mainstream white progressives for educational change that affects primarily white communities, whether low-income or middle class. On occasion, there have been effective multi-racial movements that have included large numbers of white parents and teachers. The case studies of effective uses of community organizing addressing neoliberal education policies that have been published, and that I have encountered, have been majority people of color, and have been led primarily by people of color.

Research Methods

I have been engaged with U.S. educational reform and activism through three primary projects. First, I conducted research with U.S. education reform organizations positioning themselves in relation to the evidence-based policy movement between 2005 and 2007. Second, I conducted participatory ethnographic research with multi-issue social reform organizations that used schools as geographic neighborhood sites around which to organize participation (also between 2005 and 2007). Third, I have developed collegial relationships and friendships, engaged in
pedagogical partnerships, occasionally worked alongside and served as a consultant, and conducted interviews and site visits with leaders and funders of over a dozen organizations working in the field of community organizing and education since 2007. I have also followed the flow of document production and gatherings—funding proposals, academic research, conferences, meetings, and coalition development—of anti-neoliberal education activism since early 2006. Finally, I conducted a pilot project (with Liza Pappas) in 2010-2011 on the role of private money in public educational policy. For this project I interviewed funders, leaders, and program-level staff of major advocacy organizations operating at the federal level and in several major metropolitan areas.

Throughout, I have been struck by the intensely pedagogical dimensions of educational reform; that is, by how significantly the landscape of education reform consists of activists and reformers attempting to shape the ways the powerful as well as the public understand what education is about and where it has gone wrong. The shaping of public and private understanding is a core activity within both education reform and resistance to it.

As part of these projects and as a scholar-activist, I have studied and participated in several dynamic and well-developed community organizing initiatives (both as researcher and participant). Working with established, powerful organizations and coalitions is essential for understanding the dynamics of activism. Community organizers are consummate para-ethnographers, and any anthropological inquiry with them must occur at least in part through the sort of collaborative experimentation that Marcuse suggests that ethnographers of contemporary “global assemblages” ought to be engaged.

While there are many sophisticated community organizers engaged in the field of education who conduct sophisticated ethnographic inquiry as part and parcel of their work, most activists do not engage in such practices. Due to the particular multi-sited engagement of my teaching, scholarship, and career trajectory, I have also spent a great deal of time in meetings of quite a different sort. These are activist meetings that are attempts to organize, but whose leaders (usually parents, sometimes educators or concerned citizens) are not directly engaged with movements or powerful organizations. They are meetings of groups where there is no significant awareness, capacity, or experience with effective organizing or movement-building. Such meetings are easy to identify, and follow particular patterns. Problems and frustrations predominate. Groups that remain in this inchoate, “un-organized” state for more than a meeting or two are usually facilitated by white progressive professionals who wish to engage in activism, people who fervently want to see a
particular form of change and presume that their professional skills are sufficient to the task of creating it. Such relatively un-organized organizing meetings are present in almost every urban district I have encountered over the past eight years.

For the purpose of most of my work (research, teaching, and political engagement) I have sought to identify organized groups that are contending for or with power in interesting ways; groups that are using creative tactics, developing interesting coalitions, potentially in a process of becoming movements of some sort. But most ethnographers of community-based activism spend a great deal of time exploring groups that don’t contribute to their main projects, attending meetings that may or may not turn out to be relevant. For this article, I went back over field notes taken at such meetings, gatherings of what I call “un-organized” groups across the past eight years. To be clear, these groups do not lack any coherent patterns or “organization”—they are simply not organized, as groups, in the way that groups that operate based on community organizing principles and practices as described in the previous section. For the purpose of this article, I use the term “un-organized” to indicate that an activist group is simply not engaged in a cohesive way in the activities that characterize community organizing approaches. These un-organized groups are not teaching people skills and knowledge in a systematic way, not engaging in a participatory process of identifying issues, not building alliances, and not negotiating with those in power to create and implement policies. But instead of looking at them as “failed” organizing groups, I take for granted that they are simply not organizing groups at all, that they are not doing the things that I know organizers do, and ask what, then, we can learn about white-led activism by looking at what they are doing.

**Un-organized white activists: the struggle to “get people to understand”**

Between 2006 and 2010, un-organized activist groups that were struggling against explicitly neoliberal education reform policies could be found in every district I encountered. Between 2006 and 2010 I met directly with six un-organized parent-oriented groups who were explicitly against contemporary education reform policies, and I was able to identify and correspond with members of five others that seemed to exhibit similar characteristics. These were all small, local groups motivated by the profoundly local effects of privatization- and accountability-oriented state and federal educational policies on their schools. Some were somewhat multi-racial groups of professionals, some were entirely comprised of middle-class white progressives, and one was more libertarian in its ideology. All were led by professional white people, usually older than forty years old. I never saw the same low-income parent of color show up to one of these meetings twice in this earlier
period.

Each of these groups was infused by a voluntary, civic spirit of social justice, a commitment to spread the news of the injustice and inequality of policies that were affecting their children. Each had identified specific pieces of the education reform agenda’s local manifestations as problematic, and was engaged in some process of independently learning and teaching one another more. As they learned, I saw several groups become ever more outraged and deeply, almost desperately, committed to spreading their critique to a broader audience. The meetings of these groups provide the best sense of them, revealing that the struggle for effective articulation of injustice was the mode of un-organized white-led activist groups in these years.

In late 2009, in a large city, I arrived at an evening meeting and parked my car next to a low-slung modern concrete building. It was a building that housed multiple small non-profit organizations, plus a rotating cast of tech and design startups. During the day it was filled with professionals in their thirties and forties, practical idealists sipping coffee and chipping away at the city and world’s problems. That night, at 8pm, it was empty and the door was locked. I walk around the building and come back to the front, encountering a white woman in her late forties. I said “are you here for the parent meeting?” and she said yes, eyeing me with muted curiosity and motioning me to follow her into the building as she typed in a security code.

We walked past a darkened reception area and into a fluorescent conference room. There were seven people—six women and one man—seated in off-kilter chairs. All of them wore jeans or casual dresses. One woman was black, and the rest of us in the room were white. A white-haired woman in her late fifties or early sixties, Maura, opened the meeting by saying “oh, you must be Jen. [to the group] Jen’s studying educational activism. [to me] We’d love your advice, because we are really having trouble getting things going. You know how bad things are, right? I mean, in [this city] things are really bad. The superintendent, with his crazy budget, and all these closings, and replacing things that are working with charters that just want to make a buck off of city kids, I mean I don’t even know where to start to explain to you how we got here...” She spoke quickly and then stopped to look around for backup. This group had been meeting together for over a year, and they all appeared overwhelmed at the prospect of catching me up.

I’d done my homework regarding the educational policy battles in this particular district, so after introducing myself a bit more thoroughly I assured them that they should just continue their meeting and I would ask questions if I needed to. The man in the group, in his mid-40s, said “Ok, well I’ll report on what happened at the committee meeting [to study lifting the cap on charter schools]. It’ll be fast: nothing.
I stood up and spoke against the link to school closures, and there were a few of our people there to explain things, but you know the [corporate-backed charter advocacy organization] folks were there with their charts and graphs, and our message just got lost. There were a couple of parents who said they wanted that option for their kids in the neighborhood, and that was that. We need better numbers.”

Maura, who had invited me and had referred me to several policy blogs with information on educational policy development in the city, said “We’ve been over this, though, it’s not the facts. The facts are on our side, the research is on our side. It’s that no one knows them, no one understands. We need to do a better job getting the word out.”

A younger white woman with maroon-streaked hair, in ripped jeans with a sundress over them, said “ok, so I’ll go. so we had a parent meeting that went pretty well. I think people are getting it. It’s just a lot, a lot of background. And still the parents at [her kid’s school] who are coming are the ones who can afford it, who have the time and don’t work second shift and all that. It’s all the people like us. We’re just not getting the diversity of the school.”

Maura turned to me and said: “see, so I’m sure this is something you’ve seen before. It’s really hard to get people engaged because there is just so much background, and people don’t have the time. Down in New Orleans there is a great organizer who is really engaging the African American parents, or at least it’s a mix. But up here we haven’t figured out how to do that well.”

Another woman interrupted: “But you know it’s not like we have most of the middle class white parents on board either. Most of them are just looking for ‘what am I going to do for middle school,’ okay, and they’re looking at the same test scores as the district and making their choices, just working the system.”

The lone black woman interjected: “Right, it’s all the individualism. And maybe for the professionals that’s the strategy, and for the working poor parents it’s the anxiety and too much technical information, and they need something practical. The shiny new charter company comes in and they give them that sense of hope. And we can flash our ‘well charter schools aren’t all that’ research at them but it’s just not...help me out here, Maura.”

“Right. It’s just not seen as a solution. And then we’re the naysayers who don’t have solutions. Even though that’s infuriating because of course we do! These reforms killed our solutions, they totally killed them. We had public schools that were integrated, that were working, de-tracked experiments, culturally inclusive, experiential, all the progressive methods, and they were getting results any which way you want to understand that term. But they killed those and are replacing them with
something they say is innovative and therefore good, and it’s just bullshit. And then we’re the naysayers. And, honestly who wants to come to a meeting like this? But we need folks here working with us. How are we doing on that outreach plan this week?”

The frustration was palpable by this point. Later, I suggested that they consider some simple community organizing methods for building a larger base, and I was ultimately asked to run a workshop on this topic a month or two later when they would have a few new leaders to train. The workshop was postponed and postponed, due to a lack of new leaders (and, I presumed, continuing demoralizing meetings like this one). It ultimately did not transpire.

Overwhelmingly, un-organized white-led groups struggled during this period to, as Maura put it, to “get people to understand.” A northeastern parent leader put it this way: “We just have to do a better job explaining what’s going on! If people understood, they would join us. Some people can’t afford to have this kind of radical view, I get that, they just have to do the best for their kids. But that’s the problem—nothing will change until they do. We can’t keep going as if all this is normal! I feel like I’m living in an alternate universe here, the real one though, and I don’t know how to get everyone to see it.”

This chief frustration of white-led un-organized groups during this period—those people who do not understand—was not race-neutral or class-neutral. The frustration was an often euphemized caricature of a low-income parent of color who is presumed not to have time, interest, or perhaps capacity to engage with the complexities of the injustice of educational policies. I never heard outright condemnation of people of color or poor people. Indeed, for most white leaders of these groups, there was an explicitly articulated sympathy for them. But there was a consistent certainty that because “they” are unable to engage with and come to understand what these groups know about the farce of educational reform policies, because “they” are effectively duped by education reformers, these groups were going to have a tough road forward.

Contemporary Education Activism: Nonviolent Resistance Tactics

The “Reform IS Justice” ideology of neoliberal education reform has held sway, quite effectively, from the late 1990s through around 2010-11. Since 2010, the tide has subtly but certainly shifted. Despite a doubling-down on the federal commitment to neoliberal education reform (school choice, intensification of test-based accountability for teachers, erosion of teachers’ collective bargaining rights, and a single “common core” standardized curriculum) in 2009 with a $4.35 billion “Race
To The Top” funding competition, there has been a growing wave of activist projects dedicated to dismantling various aspects of the neoliberal reform agenda.

Audit and accountability are tough objects, indeed, and to date most activists attempting to expose their effects on people are doing so through careful argument and description. But well-penned arguments have no pull on the American imagination. Neither critical deconstruction nor straightforward analysis are methods of change in this context. It is the imagery of civil resistance, what is seen as the bravery of nonviolent refusal, and the opportunity to participate in organized collective action, that communicates “truths” about the violence of state policies. The individualized and psychically isolated social subjectivities that audit, and accountability regimes produce, discussed by anthropologists of policy, (e.g. Strathern, 2002; Shore and Wright, 2003) are challenged by images and visual narratives of collective action and testimony. Participation in and witnessing of collective action and testimony enables people like Jane, the teacher in the epigraph, to imagine themselves “as part of something.”

In the past five years, there have developed visible cracks in the national corporate education reform policy agenda. There has been an increase in attention to the local instances of activism against facets of this regime, by parents, teachers, and students. Most notably, for the first time this activism has begun to take on national-scale social movement qualities. It is both bubbling up and spreading, semi-coordinated and in fits and starts, and often at a speed that has taken the media, public, and even critics and movement insiders by surprise. Embracing a discourse of violence—exposing the violent effects of policies, rather than focusing on justice, equity, excellence, participation, or other tropes also used by the reformers—has been one of the more effective tactics of these anti-reform activists. But how do white progressives think about violence and nonviolent resistance?

Civil Rights, Violence, and Nonviolence in the White Progressive Imagination

“When I saw them standing there, just standing, holding hands and singing, and being beaten down again and again by those -- those monsters -- I thought to myself, ‘the world is not how we all knew it to be.’ It all just disappeared, you know, my certainty I had from the church and my own parents. They lived there and we lived over here and that’s somehow natural, or whatever we’d been told or not been told, all that nonsense we all drank up as God-given truth, natural like the water in the well. I saw those pictures of black mothers, they were chanting and standing and even risking dying some of them so that
their little Nego girls could go to school with white little girls in Alabama, and I tell you my whole peaceful little world just fell apart seeing it. I never expected such brutality. Nothing made sense anymore, I just crumbled up inside. I could see separation for what it was, which was denying people's humanity. Their humanity. I saw it all around me. And I have never been the same since. That image is burned in my mind, I don't know how many 40-some years later. I don't know if you have anything like that you can't ever get out of your mind? I can honestly tell you it motivates everything good I'll ever do.”

This story was told to me during an interview in 2006, when I asked a mid-southern white woman in her sixties to share what made her want to do social justice work. Many of the dozens of older white activists I have worked with over the past fifteen years have a story similar to this one. I have ten or so such coming-to-consciousness-of-racism stories written in field notes or tucked into interview transcriptions, and have heard many more in activist retreats and workshops. Such stories of remembering and being motivated by the Civil Rights movement’s images of nonviolent resistance and backlash are so ubiquitous amongst white civic activists who were young adults in the 1950s and 60s that at some point I stopped taking particular note of them. (Variation seems to be generational, regional, and somewhat gendered; as a general observation, white male activists’ coming-to-political-consciousness stories as often have to do with imagery from the Vietnam War as the Civil Rights movement, and the deaths of white male civil rights activists figure prominently in the several northern white men’s stories I have heard.) Most of these stories are told quite sincerely, often either through or near to tears.

Such statements stand as a footnote to the social conscience of a particular white generation of activists in the United States. Griffin (2004) found that white collective memory of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s differed both by generation (as had been demonstrated with African American collective memory previously) and by region. I would suggest that a political subset of whites—progressives—has developed a distinct form of collective memory of this movement that highlights moments of the movement that bring both violence and triumphant nonviolent resistance into the same frame.

Images of the struggle for school desegregation played a major role in this regard, in part because of the social imaginary of the school. Schools, whatever else the U.S. public imagination imputes upon them, are first and foremost supposed to be places of refuge and peace. That they have in fact always been sites of structural and direct
violence is without question true, but also beside the point. It is the persistence of a social imaginary of the school as a peaceful refuge for learning and idyllic childhood that is disrupted by images of violence. This is why the photos and paintings of the violence of school desegregation had—and continued to have—such resonance for white progressives. *The Problem We All Live With*, the famous Norman Rockwell painting of a young African American girl, Ruby Bridges, being escorted into a school by members of the National Guard, with graffiti and splattered tomatoes invoking the presence of angry white mobs, is emblematic of the sort of imagery of Civil Rights that shaped the collective memory of a generation of white progressives. One white education activist from Maine, a lifelong educator who was originally politicized by watching the desegregation activism as a young man, explained to me that the fact that men die on battlefields is one thing, and might be right or wrong. But that children should face the “specter of mob violence” at the doors of a schoolhouse “grates on the conscience,” violating the “feeling person’s sense of what school ought to be.”

When the discourse of violence and the tactics of nonviolent resistance against the neoliberal educational policy regime became broadly visible to un-organized white activists around 2010-11, this discourse was immediately interpellated for many into a particular white social imaginary of what it means and looks like for white people to recognize structural violence in education, identify with it (in Rockwell’s titular example, a “problem we all live with” [my emphasis]), and engage in nonviolent resistance. Nonviolence in education in 2011 was immediately tied, for many white progressives, to a (rather fictionalized, to be sure) collective memory of the Civil Rights movement.

**From Justice to Violence and Nonviolence**

In 2010-11, multi-racial nonviolent resistance arrived on the scene of anti-neoliberal education activism. As parent, teacher, and student dissenters have found their voices over the past five years, it is the voices denouncing violence that have been by far the most resonant. The spreading of a language of nonviolent resistance—walkouts, boycotts, sit-ins, opt-outs, rallies, strikes—invoked the symbolic and structural violence of contemporary educational policies and instantly seemed to evade the “Reform IS Justice” ideology of the policy regime. The following civil resistance organizations are a few of those that have begun to create new national networks of resistance to neoliberal education reform policies:

**United Opt Out**, whose motto is “we don’t negotiate with children’s lives.” This organization lives online, and serves as an information- and tool-sharing
clearinghouse for individuals and groups that are interested in parents opting their children out of state-mandated standardized tests.

**Parents Across America**, a grassroots organization of parent groups attempting to bring “common sense” to educational policies and practices. In practice, PAA is an organization of middle-class parents, organized in local chapters, who study the vicissitudes of local corporate education reform and attempt to intervene where they can. More often than not, to date, this intervention has been in the form of promoting their analysis to other parents through meetings, advocacy through participation in local educational politics, and petitions and letter-writing campaigns. I have followed several PAA chapters, and have seen very little direct action that takes place.

**Student Unions** and other student activist groups that have studied and organized to resist school disciplinary policies, such as zero-tolerance and increased policing in public schools that enroll significant numbers of students of color. Youth activists in localities across the country, often facilitated by community educators and trained organizers, have won policy changes including concrete changes to disciplinary policy. Their actions have generally been more demonstratively militant throughout, involving walk-outs, sit-ins, rallies, and marches. Perhaps the most obvious sign of this contingency’s success: within the span of five years, the term activists use to describe the structural violence of disciplinary policies and practices, “school-to-prison pipeline,” has traveled from critical obscurity to part of the mainstream progressive lexicon.

**Badass Association of Teachers**, a largely online network of teachers dedicated to resisting corporate education reform. Its existence gives credibility to:

**Leftist Teacher Unionism**, which is an important development in anti-neoliberal activism that is mostly beyond the scope of this paper. The teacher strikes in Chicago in 2011 marked a new era for U.S. teacher resistance to the public austerity and accountability aspects of neoliberal policy (Utricht, 2014). Leftist factions of mainstream teachers’ unions have been gaining power over the past five years, and have begun contending for and sometimes winning union leadership in some places (for example, in Seattle and Massachusetts in 2014).

It was these organizational voices that began to connect bureaucracy and violence, disciplinary policy and violence, standards and violence, accountability and violence, and choice and violence. But how did these new activist discourses play out in the un-organized community groups where most local parent resistance takes shape?
Un-organized white-led groups after the tide turned: negotiating and appropriating violence and nonviolent resistance

By 2012-14, the possibility of broad public critique of and resistance to neoliberal educational policies had become widespread. I attended ten meetings of four different low-capacity, un-organized activist groups during these years, in four different cities, and read minutes or participants’ narrative descriptions of over a dozen more. These meetings had different characteristics, and they felt substantively different than the un-organized meetings just a few years earlier. While just as disconnected from community organizing methods and traditions as prior un-organized resistance groups, groups of mostly parents in these years were generally able to recruit more people from the outset simply by announcing that they were exploring forming a “local chapter” or discussion group related to one of the national projects listed in the section above.

Here is one example of a group, in late 2013, that was focused on high-stakes testing. A meeting in a medium-sized post-industrial city opened late one afternoon with about twenty people in attendance. Fifteen more trickled in throughout the next hour. It was too many people to sit in a circle, too many people to do more than cursory introductions. Introductions focused on the connection of each person to the schools. “I’m Karen, and I’m a parent of three children who go to Grand Maple” was typical. At this particular meeting, the facilitator (a parent of grown children who had attended the district schools) noted that it was “great to see so many new faces.”

The room was set up such that people who came late could slip in barely noticed and sit outside the main circular cluster of chairs, and that is what happened. The inner circle of the meeting -- the people who were there from the prompt beginning -- was comprised of about twelve parents, three teachers, and three high school students. About 3/4 of those in the inner circle appeared white, with one Latina parent and a few Latino/a youth. Those who slipped in later and sat on the outside of the circle were almost the inverse—about 3/4 Latino and Latina, and a few white. The facilitator did not make any effort to reconfigure the room, and few latecomers spoke during the meeting.

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss new state high-stakes testing regulations, and to strategize for opting out of tests. The facilitator, a university staff member and mother of two middle-school students, told me that a very small group of parents had been meeting for several months. They had found one another online through an Internet forum, and had formulated a plan to inform parents in the district about their rights to opt their children out of the tests. But the group had
grown quickly, and the last two open meetings had not gone so smoothly. Most of the many newcomers over the past two meetings—basically all of the Latino/a parents, from my understanding—came because they were invited by the one Latina parent in the initial core group.

This particular meeting started out as a report from several of the initial core-group parents about the legal ramifications of opting out of the test. One white man, who was both a teacher and a parent, reported: “So, I know there has been concern that if too many of us opt our kids out, there will be a loss of funding for our schools. I looked into that, and no one wants to say it’s not possible, but it doesn’t seem like it’s going to happen.”

One of the other teachers jumped in: “Yeah, but that’s what they are telling us—that the tests are really mandatory for state funding this time, that we don’t have any options and could be shut down like [names two district schools that were shut down the previous year]. I mean who knows how they make those decisions about which schools to close. They are starting to play hardball. We’re all so tired of this, trust me, we all know what’s going on. But we also need to keep our jobs. We’re committed to these kids, to helping them get what they need, and god knows they need so much.”

The Latina parent in the inside circle piped in: “I want to know more about how the school is even helping our kids compete, though. Even if we accepted these tests, how are the schools helping? Our kids come home and complain about getting taken out of class for the littlest things, you know? And then we hear they have bad test scores, well how can they have good test scores if they are not even allowed to be in class?”

A white inner-circle parent said “But that’s the thing, Vanessa, it’s not about the test scores! We can’t make it about that, we have to stop using that as a measure even amongst ourselves! The test scores are not real. They are not measuring what’s important. Creativity and problem solving, critical thinking.”

One of the three high schoolers jumps in: “I mean, if you saw the practice tests, I have to agree with you, Miss. Like, it’s like, they don’t even do nothing. It’s like read this passage about something that don’t even make sense, and be like really really stressed out about it because it’s gonna mean you graduate or your school closes or something, I don’t even know. How’s that going to get me anywhere though? And we spend a lotta time on it, working these tests, learning all the tricks. It’s like most of what we been doing this past month. So yeah people kind of blow up and then—”

The facilitator jumped in: “Thank you young man, I really appreciate you being here to share that with us, I can’t tell you how much—”
She was interrupted by another student, a young Latina woman, who sighed loudly and said “Yeah ok, but like, you gotta understand. I’m sorry but we got some messed up rules. We’re supposed to pass these tests, and we are trying, we are, right? But, mirosa, we also supposed to be thinking about our futures. Like, not just this test, even though without passin’ it we won’t have a future or whatever, but like also our actual futures like getting a job and college, which is what I wanna do. And this is just not gonna work if we’re being told ‘you can’t wear this’ and if like three times you wear the wrong thing and you get suspended, and -- I mean they called the cops on my girl just Wednesday for, like, nothin’! Yelling in Spanglish or something, that’s like a crime now! This place is messed up, that’s all I’m sayin’, you all tryin’ but I’m sorry. You don’t even know.”

There was a long pause. The white parents glanced nervously at one another, the students giggled and poked one another, and finally one of the Latina parents from the outer circle said: “I’m here because we have to find a way to support our kids getting an education, a real education. And I’m sorry I came in late but I just want to thank Vanessa for inviting me, and all of us.”

The facilitator, obviously rattled, said: “I want to break in here and ask everyone to think about why they’re here. And - and thank you for sharing, young people. We obviously have a lot going on in our school, a lot we want to change to make things better. But we can’t do everything at once. Can we focus on coming together around these new tests, which we all agree are hurting the students and detracting from their education? Because I think we can really build something here, with all this energy, if we can just stay focused.”

From the perspective of the facilitator, who vented to me outside afterwards, this meeting was “another mess.” There were multiple discussions taking place at the same time. There were clear divides between the white anti-testing parents, who wanted to focus on legal strategies for opting out, and the Latino and Latina parents and youth, who she perceived “had another agenda.” Vanessa (the Latina inner-circle parent) later told me that she was interested in stopping the tests, but that the other parents she invited had a lot of other questions about the school that were important as well. She wanted to connect the resistance to the tests to resistance to a broader pattern of policies that disrespect and criminalize youth—and “particularly Hispanic youth.” The youth, of course, pointed out this gap directly in the meeting, with adolescent irreverence and a determination to make sure that adults understand the realities of their lives in schools, where they witness and experience symbolic and structural violence daily. The several other Latina adult speakers in this meeting used a more careful grammar to make the same point about the limitations of a
conversation that begins and ends with test resistance. For example, the Latina parents each used the phrase “our kids,” suggesting that there was not a universal experience of schooling, and that some kids—“ours”—experienced a different type of violence than others.

Most un-organized meetings were run in a similar way, as ostensibly open-floor participatory spaces, with a facilitator moving the discussion from one agenda item to the next and trying, with varying degrees of skill and authority, to tack back to her or his agenda. Inchoate coalitions between white parents, parents of color, diverse teachers, and youth thus often manifested, at least within meetings, as a series of non-sequiturs. Each contingency stated its truths over and over again, with someone (almost always a white middle-class professional, occasionally a black or Latino/Latina teacher) at the helm pulling things back to her or his notion of the central concern.

The patterns that emerged in this and other un-organized meetings I attended during the 2012-2014 period certainly suggest many dynamics that have been well documented by anthropologists of education, such as liberal white domination of space and a thin democratic impetus (Castagno, 2014) and exclusion and/or appropriation of critical voices of youth of color (Vaught, 2008). These un-organized, multi-racial groups were all characterized by a persistence of white professional leadership or co-leadership. While black and Latino people participated in every meeting I attended, they often spoke up and saw their concerns pushed aside, or recognized in the most cursory fashion. I never saw these un-organized groups shift an agenda to put people of color’s specific concerns at the center. Furthermore, I frequently saw a distinctly pained look on white leaders’ faces as they tried to integrate the individual story a parent or student of color told with the meeting agenda.

While there was little recognition and frequent subtle disrespect of Latino/a and black parents’ and young people’s stories in meetings, there was a remarkably consistent effect of Latino/a and black participation on white progressives once they left these meetings. Frequently, during this particular period of time, I found that the building of a one-way sense of affinity, and even demonstrable small acts of solidarity, occurred for white participants. In this particular school, the next instance of nonviolent action was a small student walkout several weeks after the meeting, in conjunction with a school-to-prison pipeline policy action at the state level. About fifteen students participated, walking out of class ten minutes before the lunch period and chanting in the halls briefly (and somewhat tentatively, from what one teacher reported to me, as they were embarrassed about their small numbers). The
students were initially disciplined with three-day suspensions by a school administration intent to show order. But one of the parent-dominated activist group leaders—Jessica, a white woman who was not the facilitator of the meeting described—wrote an email to the administration voicing her support for what she called “student leaders” who had been “speaking with our parent group about their concerns about school discipline, some of which seem to be legitimate.” The suspensions were revoked without public comment (saving the students one day of their three). It was a small victory, to be sure, particularly since the resistance event itself had gained no publicity even locally because it was neither large enough to be truly disruptive nor well-organized enough to engage the press. Nonetheless, the testimony of Latino and Latina students at the previous meeting had resulted in a small but concrete act of white solidarity that mitigated the administrative backlash against nonviolent activism; I was surprised by this. When I asked Jessica why she wrote the email, she shrugged and said, “well, I figure we ought to stick together in this if we can. What they were saying about suspensions, we all know it’s not right. I heard about the school-to-prison pipeline and all that, just last week on the radio actually. Those kids are getting hurt for no reason. It’s not that different from how testing is hurting everyone’s kids, not really. So I say good for them for standing up. We all have to stand up more, I think it’s time for that. And I hope they stand up with us, too.”

A tentative language of non-violence, in un-organized spaces of resistance to neoliberal policies in U.S. public schools, was consistently invoked by white organizers during this period. Whereas most of my conversations with white facilitators before 2010 were filled with language of discourse and justice—a desire to explain, to inform, make people understand the injustice of educational policies—between 2012 and 2014 almost all of my conversations with white un-organized parent activists included the language of nonviolent action: stand up, walk out, opt out, take a stand, make a move, rally, demonstrate. These activists likely learned to use this language from the national movements and organizations, but I saw them learn to make this language meaningful by appropriating the story-telling tactics of black and Latino/a parents and youth in these meetings.

Through interactions at meetings like this one, professional parents who were concerned with testing, narrowing of curriculum, or elimination of electives often seemed to be learning from people of color how to frame their grievances in terms of specific stories of violence rather than general or analytical arguments about justice. The focus of white public and private discourse often shifted after non-sequitur meetings like this one, from explanations of systemic injustice to specific
instances of harm, of violence. The individual suffering caused to children by intensification of testing became a frequent subject of discussion, where before the testing discussion had been almost exclusively about the structural injustice of complex accountability policies. The “destruction” of young people’s love of learning became a frequent topic of discussion in meetings about curriculum standardization and test preparation. Often white parents would, like Jessica in the story above, demonstrate solidarity by affirming students’ right to protest their conditions while simultaneously equivocating their own children’s suffering under testing.

Further, as often as not, white organizers invoked their memory of the civil rights movement as their lodestar. The subsequent meeting of these same parent leaders (recall, all white and one Latina woman) to plan the next large meeting was opened up with the facilitator declaring “well, after that little walkout, and with our opt-out plans, it’s beginning to feel just like civil rights here at [our school]! I like it! I’ve been thinking we should talk about how all this makes us feel, too, because that seems to work. Let’s all come up with stories about opting our kids out, about all the harms we know these policies do to our kids, to tell at the next meeting.”

Suddenly, whereas previously most white progressive anti-accountability-regime activists had been discussing the Orwellian injustice of testing and accountability policies and expressing deep critical and analytical frustration, the same and similar groups, in response to the same policies, were now telling stories of “harms.” In earlier years, a major theme of un-organized meetings involved white professional parents bemoaning that working-class and poor parents, particularly parents of color, did not come to their meetings or understand the complexities of how unjust the system is. In this later period, white parents were more inclined to appropriate the analysis, framing, and tactics of such communities for their own use.

**Coda: Black lives matter**

Since the research and initial drafting of this article, the Black Lives Matter movement has emerged on the national scene. This movement is, by design, uncompromisingly black-led and also resistant to facile coalition with white progressives (Garza, 2014). Founded by three black women who are themselves powerful organizers, the movement puts forth a radical ontology of the value of black life in the face of patent disregard for black people in the institutions governed by U.S. neoliberal capitalism as well as on the streets of black communities disproportionately surveilled and targeted by a mostly white police force that is not accountable to the communities. Diverse young organizers of color, in particular,
have grabbed ahold of this movement and taken it in different directions than its founders originally envisioned or intended. And, like all movements, but particularly movements that have lives both on the streets and in cyberspace where hashtags morph and proliferate more quickly than analysts’ abilities to interpret them, Black Lives Matter/#blacklivesmatter has come to operate as a discursive frame within which much related contemporary racial justice work is understood.

Youth of color education organizing was well established long before the Black Lives Matter movement went viral in the wake of the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in the summer of 2014. Youth of color education organizing was seeded by the radical side of the youth development model that began in the late 1990s and gained traction (Ginwright and Cammarota 2002), and gained significant local power in the past five years through mobilizations against school closures in Philadelphia (http://thenotebook.org/blog/125151/national-campaign-connects-students-issue-school-closings) and Chicago (http://areachicago.org/interview-with-organizers-from-the-chicago-student-union/), organizing against the school-to-prison pipeline (see the work of the Black Youth Project at http://byp100.org/), and creative youth-led organizing against the violence of economic abandonment policies on schools (see Detroit Summer at https://detroitsummer.wordpress.com/20th-anniversary-archives/). Youth organizing groups have generally been developed by well-trained, professional community and youth organizers. Since part of their mission was educational and since building leadership fit in well with established “youth development” foundation funding streams, youth education organizing groups were often more easily able to gain funding than parent-led education organizing groups. These youth organizing groups—often in the form of “Student Unions” — generally built and sustained leadership fairly consistently in recent years. The Black Lives Matter movement did not bring about youth organizing, but youth of color education organizing has gained significant strength and momentum for its work as the movement has nurtured its focus and energy.

From what I have observed during the first half of the current academic year (2014-15), in a much more limited set of meetings and locations, many white progressive parents and teachers seem highly ambivalent about the emboldened radical youth of color organizing that they are encountering. The un-organized meetings I have attended and tracked in the past six months (all of them in New England) have illustrated a different form of fragmentation than what I saw in the previous few years. Everyone seems to be more on edge. White activists express a more diverse and fragmented set of views, and education activists of color seem to express overall more certainty and unity.
Although I do not have sufficient data to do more than speculate this connection, the Black Lives Matter movement seems to be challenging the easy citation of civil rights by white activists. The version of civil rights taught to white progressives in textbooks and mainstream media seemed capable of inspiring white progressive activists to adopt and appropriate people of color’s framing and tactics. But the language of black lives matter seems just as likely to fragment and flummox white progressives, invoking, in my observation, a version of the ambiguity many white progressives expressed fifty years ago toward the black power movement.

The movement against high-stakes testing persisted in the fall of 2014, gaining popularity at a remarkable rate, propelled by cyber-activism and the intensification of testing due to the federal adoption of the Common Core curriculum. But in the face-to-face group interactions—those un-organized meetings that are the focus of this article, and that still predominate in anti-neoliberal educational activism on the ground—the gap between opting out of testing and challenging the structural violence of the public education system feels suddenly different. The tenuous, liberal racial solidarities that felt sustainable (though certainly not ethical) a year ago now simply require more of white progressives who wish to participate in coalition with people of color: more recognition, more listening, more risk. Such coalitions also threaten far more openly to offer white activists less power to define the discussion. Resistance that a year ago seemed as if it might have become a liberal, multi-racial, white-professional-dominated coalition, now seems like its window may have suddenly closed.

While there is certainly a cautiousness and ambivalence among white activists that should be interrogated further, there is also suddenly a true feeling of movement, not just inchoate organizing, in un-organized education activism now. In the five multi-racial parent-dominated meetings I have attended recently, it truly feels as if something is about to happen. Among white parents and teachers, there is palpable anxiety, and little of the easy solidarity that characterized earlier years; the violence against youth of color in urban public schools, like the police violence against these same young people on the streets, now seems impossible to ignore or equivocate. I have not seen a new strategy emerge for white un-organized group leaders. However, quite unlike the almost overwhelming inertia of meetings in the earliest years of my encounters with un-organized activists, in the fall of 2014 everyone seemed to be leaning forward in every activist meeting, interested to be present for what will happen next.
Conclusion

In this article I have traced a period of intensified visibility of activism against various policies and practices of neoliberal education reforms in the United States. This period has energized diverse critical activists working on every education reform issue, from labor to curriculum, testing to school discipline, democratic control to teacher turnover. Suddenly, there is a growing public sense of such issues as more than technocratic concerns. Suddenly, stories of the structural and symbolic violence of neoliberal education reform are being told in the progressive and even mainstream media, and activist groups are popping up and gaining broad interest all over the country. Suddenly, the field of anti-neoliberal education activism seems to have departed from the discursive flailing against the surreal Reform IS Justice regime of the previous decade, and has begun instead to resembles a regular David-and-Goliath struggle.

This article serves as a caveat to any facile interpretation of this activist turn. The structural violence of neoliberal educational policy is not the multi-headed evil dragon, finally in range to be slayed as our best warriors lead the way forward. When we drill down to the places where ordinary people—particularly parents—with grievances meet to discuss them, we find that many un-organized white-controlled activists have simply shifted from an impotent politics of leading by explaining injustice to a slightly more effective politics of leading by interpreting and appropriating the language of violence and nonviolence. But these self-appointed leaders have often done so without sharing, let alone ceding, power to the black and Latino/a activist parents who have always experienced -- and, even in the most un-organized of meetings, often reveal that they keenly understand -- the most violent effects of every educational policy regime in this nation’s history.

It turns out that there may after all be a liberal white “soft bigotry of low expectations,” as the No Child Left Behind Act noted, albeit one that today undermines the Latino/a and black education activists who have in fact both historically and in recent years been the primary drivers of progressive organizing coalitions in education. As the growing salience of a language of the violence of education reform runs headlong into the powerful insight and organizing acumen of the Black Lives Matter movement, there may yet be a quick antidote to the many un-organized white professionals in this heady time who are leading the charges to slay every neoliberal dragon. Would that this antidote might become such a vast expansion of powerful and participatory organizing coalitions that the un-organized white-led meetings I chronicle here might themselves fade into obscurity.
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