(Un)building the Wall
Reinventing Ourselves as Others in the Post-truth Era

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Background: Out of Comfort Zones

IN MY SYLLABI, I write for my students (future teachers) that, unlike many teachers who romanticize teaching and learning,

> learning is not always fun. Sometimes we need to feel pains and share our pains to learn. Hopefully, this will make all of us better teachers to lift a bit of a burden from our students' shoulders and make our pedagogy more accessible.

Thinking and writing about post-truth is quite uncomfortable, as it requires self-criticism, critical reflection, and confession. We are trained as professionals to present our arguments tactfully—in a way that would not offend anyone. However, positioning my scholarship in the (post)critical camp, I find this problematic. How can I be critical and not disrupt the unjust structures? How can I challenge the normalized meta-narratives and expect *all* readers to be happy with my writing? I realize that this professionalism leads us to professional tribalism where we write for those who agree with us and expect recognition from them, which is counter-transformative. How could we make a difference if we only engaged in conversations with those who are already in agreement? bell hooks (1996) has eloquently made the case for why and how education should be transformative. How can I, as an educator, work for transformation and yet be afraid of making myself and my readers uncomfortable?

In 2016, I wrote to my #bad_hombre and #nasty_women friends that Trump is old news. Trump, as president or not, has been ruling all of us for a long time. This might be offensive to many of us, but Trump embodies *our* values as a collective, those values that we practice, not those that we preach. We live in a world that recognizes models more than philosophers. Our society spends much more on liquor than on books. Even in academia, football players are more popular than scholars. Thus, it is not surprising that a populist wins the presidential election… We are so

forgetful about the fact that less educated voters still have an equal right to vote as everybody else. This concern is actually as old as the history of ancient Greek philosophy.

Everyday Practices of Dehumanization: An Intruder Incident

The following is a narrative from a doctoral student at an urban university, which was distributed in a faculty meeting:

> At 9:00 PM during class, a non-[university] woman, who appeared homeless and deranged, gained access to [the college's] building and found her way up to the floor and our classroom. As a student enrolled in this evening class, I felt very vulnerable and frightened when this unexpected intruder found her way straight into my learning classroom without anyone else like security, police, front office, etc. knowing of her entry. Upon the woman's entry, the classroom of one instructor and 16 students were completely speechless, shocked, and unsure of how to restrain or push the intruder out of the classroom. The woman was yelling of blood and death around her and her need to get in contact with a detective. While all of this was going on, she blocked the only unlocked exit of the classroom, for the other two exit doors that opened up to the fourth-floor offices were locked. At that moment, I had no idea if she was armed and how we would be able to exit the classroom. I wanted to be home, safe, and far away from [the] university. After being subjected to the intruder for over 15 minutes, campus police finally arrived to our classroom. As a student paying for a safe learning environment, I definitely felt unsafe and vulnerable at the hands of a deranged woman for such a long period of time. I would expect [the university] campus police to be in charge of checking on classrooms and buildings when they know late night classes, especially the 7:15-9:45 PM classes, are in session. It shouldn't have taken them over 15 minutes to arrive at the scene. Even after the woman was removed from the classroom, nobody (security, campus police, etc.) came to check on us. I was still shaken up by incident and didn't know that the woman was removed from the building. Assuming she was gone, [the instructor] ended class since everyone wanted to get out of the building. As we all left the building, we spotted the same deranged woman on the street right outside of the building. I was surprised and concerned to see her on the street when she could have followed us to our car mad that we didn't seek help for a "detective" for the killing she described earlier. I would have thought we might have escorts awaiting us especially after being exposed to such an incident not even five minutes before.

After this anecdote was shared in the faculty meeting, people endorsed a proposal that the building needs more security measures. No one questioned the very problematic message that the narrative conveyed. This made me wonder: How do we know that this person is a non-university individual? How do we know she is homeless? Why do we think she's dangerous? How would people have reacted if she had been a well-dressed, White, middle-class person? How could we educate teachers to teach the *intruder's* children, who probably go to a public school in the neighborhood, and yet be afraid of her presence? How is it that socioeconomic status, which is entangled with race, gender, and so many other things, justify the incrimination of this person? And, last but not

least, why are we content with how easily we put *our* safety first at the cost of dehumanizing *others*?

To provide some contextual information, I should add that quite a few unsheltered homeless people live in the parking lot next to the college building. To me, these people are our neighbors, and the fact that they do not have a home does not make them less legitimate as neighbors. However, apparently to many spectators, they are seen as less human, dangerous, and criminals who make the city ugly and unpleasant.

I was pissed. I was annoyed about the very normalized discourse that perpetuates the hierarchy of privilege by incrimination of people of color and those of a lower socioeconomic class. To most of my progressive colleagues, we shall spend more on security to prevent *intrusion* incidents. This mindset is very familiar. It reminds me of the wall along the U.S. southern border to prevent border crossing—i.e., intrusion. This is the same xenophobia that exists in the rhetoric that justifies building a border wall as a national emergency that produces our bodies as vulnerable and potential victims and *others'* bodies as smugglers, criminals, bad hombres, dangerous, and potential violators. Indeed, the rise of Trump as a sociopolitical phenomenon is a true result of the everyday practice of power and privilege in this country.

Living a Post-truth Life

Post-truth as a socio-political phenomenon became a hot topic in 2016. The Oxford Dictionaries named it the 2016 word of the year after a 2,000 percent growth in its usage compared to 2015 (Midgley, 2016). This has been attributed to the rise of right-wing populism and its manifestation in the Brexit and the U.S. presidential election. The Oxford Dictionaries define post-truth as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Post-truth, 2019). Like many other *posts-*, it is equivocal whether the prefix "post" is meant to indicate the idea that we are either "past" truth in a temporal sense or that truth has been eclipsed, dismantled, deconstructed, and/or made irrelevant. According to Fuller (2018a), post-truth is more about justification than truth— meaning that, in the post-truth era, we are puzzled by the conditions of possibility in which truth is determined, rather than truth itself, which is what Kant called transcendental arguments (Stroud, 1968). Fuller (2018b) uses the metaphor of astrologers who correctly predict a person's fate, a natural disaster, or more generally, a causation that is claimed on the back of correlation:

> In the history of modern philosophy, 'sensation' or 'sense perception' has been the catchall term for all these simulacra of knowledge, with the stress placed on what people receive passively from the world rather than actively construct for themselves. Following Hume, a skeptical spin on 'induction' cast these simulacra as a pseudo-method. And in our more explicitly 'cognitivist' age, the same phenomena provide evidence of 'confirmation bias'. (para. 12)

Indeed, the post-truth is not about whether the Southern border situation is a national emergency, the 2017 inauguration was the biggest political demonstration of the past decades, global warming is a hoax, or the crime rate has declined, to mention a few. Rather, post-truth is about the conditions of possibility of accepting alternative facts as true. The post-truth condition is about how beliefs are justified, rather than whether the beliefs themselves are true. This

discourse, however, is typically obstructed by a reductionist attempt to distinguish *rational* and *irrational* paths to inquiry. The many efforts, starting with Descartes in the early modern era, to define a *method* that, in principle, might justify any true belief are the culmination of this line of thought. In the 16th century, Descartes (1993) rejected contingency, quantified science, privileged individual reason, justified rationalism, and established essentialism and the mind/body distinction in his manuscript, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*. Descartes claimed the unity of science and its knowledge and, further, stated that only knowledge produced by science can be true. In summation, St. Pierre (2014) wrote that Cartesian epistemology reorganized knowledge as science. Descartes coined the modern subject of knowledge, *cogito*—the unified, conscious, coherent, stable, rational, unassailable, knowing individual who existed ahead of knowledge and culture. Later, Nietzsche argued that "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything" (Nietzsche & Hollingdale, 1989, p. 45). In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1984) explained that Descartes "broke with this when he said, 'To accede to truth, it suffices that I be *any* subject which can see what is evident'" (pp. 371-372).

For many of us who have studied "post" theories and have found value in utilizing them as analytical tools in our scholarship and personal lives, "post-truth" is a challenge. McIntyre (2018) wrote, "Even if right-wing politicians and other science deniers were not reading Derrida and Foucault, the germ of the idea made its way to them: science does not have a monopoly on the truth" (p. 141), citing the same arguments and techniques of postmodernism to attack the truth of other scientific claims that clash with their conservative ideology. McIntyre quoted Bruno Latour (2004) and used a metaphor of an arms dealer who learns one of his weapons has been used to kill an innocent:

> Do you see why I am worried? I myself have spent some time in the past trying to show *the lack of scientific certainty* inherent in the construction of facts. I too made it a "primary issue." But I did not exactly aim at fooling the public by obscuring the certainty of a closed argument—or did I? After all, I have been accused of just that sin. Still, I'd like to believe that, on the contrary, I intended to emancipate the public from prematurely naturalized objectified facts. Was I foolishly mistaken? Have things changed so fast? (p. 227)

The irony is that the *post-* theories have been intended for "radical openness" (hooks, 1989), and now, they have become dangerous tools and techniques in the hands of right-wing populism to challenge liberal values, as well as the establishment. Admitting the manifestation of post-truth in public as a challenge for the posts, I should make explicit that this prologue must be understood as written "*sous rature*" (Heidegger, 1995) or what Derrida (1976) has elaborated on as "under erasure" (p. 60). Writing under erasure requires writing my argument for and against the idea of post-truth. As Parks (2009) has put it, "writing under erasure can be deployed when the concept under consideration is both necessary and rejected" (p. 16). Lather and St. Pierre (2007) used "deconstruction" as the general goal for post inquiry. In other words, all post theories, like genealogy, archaeology, marginality, performativity, and concepts like assemblage, bodies without organs, intra-action, and others, are forms of deconstruction. In this sense, my writing under erasure should be deconstructive. According to Derrida (1990), deconstruction is a way of reading, and it is especially useful when the researcher wants to trouble a normalized, taken-for-granted structure and break it apart. But, more than that, it is an attitude, a way of listening, reading, thinking, and living. Those who studied deconstruction easily identify binary logic, hierarchies,

and structures that appealed to foundationalism and transcendentalism. Since we live in these structures, we are constructed by and through them, and we might have gained advantages from the very structures that we criticize. All structures were created at some point and there were some advantages in the structures—at least for a group of people. However, the perpetuation of the structures and the normalization of them is problematic. Thus, Spivak (1967) defined deconstruction as "persistent critique of what one cannot not want" (p. 28).

> Deconstruction is inventive or it is nothing at all; it does not settle for methodological procedures, it opens up a passageway, it marches ahead and marks a trail; its writing is not only performative, it produces rules—other conventions—for new performativities and never installs itself in the theoretical assurance of a simple opposition between performative and constative. Its process involves an affirmation, this latter being linked to the coming in event, advent, invention. (Derrida, 1989, p. 42)

This does not mean that everything goes or that one could do anything as deconstruction. Unlike positivist research methodology, in which a tightly structured method guarantees the reliability and validity of the study, in a post analysis, like this, theory is key. Theory makes what Sandra Harding (1992) called "strong objectivity" thinkable. In other words, as Donna Haraway (1988) rejected fundamentalism and believed that there was no "god trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (p. 581), our *standpoints* (Harding, 1991) are the beginnings of seeing the world from where we are. In this sense, I am methodologically in the same camp with those post-truthers/science-deniers/conspiracy-theorists who believe Google is not *neutral* and is "suppressing voices of conservatives" (Trump, 2018), which is an uncomfortable place to be.

Problematization of Post-truth: Ideological Supremacy, Identity Politics, and Reductionism

Acknowledging that post-truth is not about truth but rather about the conditions in which truth is decided, I am not worried about the existence or abuse of *alternative facts* or *fake news*. Post-truth conditions have existed for a long time and were even identified by Plato in *Theaetetus* (Burnyeat, 1990). It is not even my main concern that the post-truth has given power to those who have an opposing political perspective that is capable of threatening my personal life as a minority—and, to some extent, have already terrorized it. What makes me worried, and indeed has been my biggest motivation to start this project, is ideologic supremacy. Whether we are liberals or conservatives, we all have our own standpoints and generate "situated knowledges" (Haraway, 1988) that can lead to post-truth. "One should not assume that post-truth arises only from others, or that its results are somebody else's problem" (McIntyre, 2018, p. 164). What is problematic is the alteration and segregation that is associated with post-truth, which "amounts to a form of ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not" (McIntyre, 2018, p. 12).

Nieto (2017) reflected on how multiculturalism has been perceived as merely ethnic diversity among American educators, and she called for intersectional and multi-dimensional implementations of multiculturalism, which is a third-wave feminist contribution (Crenshaw, 1990). Indeed, some aspects of diversity have been addressed more than others partially because American scholars and activists tend to reduce their ethical work to identity politics activism—i.e., a tendency for people of a particular religion, race, social background, etc., to form exclusive

political alliances to advocate for their own interests. I have been asked by several colleagues and friends why a man—referring to me—should initiate a feminist organization, which to me is a ridiculous question. To me, it is problematic that I was the only male student in almost all of my Women's Studies courses, as it suggests that men do not care about sexism. This is not an unproblematic assumption that one should only advocate for their people (*Self*). While American activism discourages fighting for the *Other*, it is ironic that those advocates who most definitely have read critical theories and studied mechanisms of alteration and othering create the same dichotomy of Self/Other. As long as this identity politics activism is the mainstream activism, there is no surprise that we should fight battles of representation.

Educational scholars have researched and written extensively about issues of equity, including women who use feminist theories, people of color who use critical race theories, members of LGBTQ+ communities who use queer theories, indigenous people who advocate for indigenous funds of knowledge, immigrant scholars who work on issues of inclusion for immigrants, to mention a few. I argue that there is a limit to this type of work. There are categories of identity politics that are inherently excluded from academia. For instance, many of us have studied issues of representation and yet forget a simple fact that we can never represent the poor. We can have a woman, gay, Black, Muslim, and/or immigrant scholars or elected officials, but we can never have a homeless or even a poor one. This is not merely an issue of social mobility, but it is about identity transformation. That is, even if we have experienced poverty in our lives, as soon as we become a representative (scholar or elected official), we do not belong to that socioeconomic class anymore. We cut our ties, we change our lifestyles, neighborhoods, cars, homes, shopping patterns, expenditures, etc. because we seek welfare. Who does not know of scholars and/or activists who work around issues of poverty but only frequent upscale stores and classy restaurants?

This is one reason that I am critical of identity politics activism, and Sandra Harding (1991) has discussed this much more eloquently. Being from a lower socioeconomic class is not the only absent category from academia. Academia also lacks political diversity. Over the past year, while job hunting, I was asked several versions of the following question in explicit and implicit ways: How could a feminist/progressive/queer/person of color/Muslim be a successful teacher educator in a conservative/White/rural/Southern community? And my response has been "this is the same essential question that I try to address in my multicultural education classes for my preservice teachers; i.e., "How can we teach those who are different from us?"

My multicultural approach to addressing post-truth conditions is to acknowledge political ideology as a diversity factor in the same way that race, class, language, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, etc. make people different. Similar to racism, sexism, ableism, xenophobia, and homophobia, ideological supremacy is dangerous and creates an oppressive structure. I realize that it is hard work to advocate for the *Other*, especially when it is the political rival or enemy. I feel this into my bones, how uncomfortable it is to speak up for an unpopular conservative student who expresses anti-immigrant sentiments in my class while a presidential executive order (i.e., Travel Ban[1]) has separated me and my children from the rest of my family. However, the ethical work of multiculturalism is not to increase representation for myself and *my people*, rather it is to advocate for all minoritized and marginalized people as Rosa Luxemburg (1961) wrote *Freiheit ist immer Freiheit der Andersdenkenden* translated as, *freedom is always the freedom of dissenters*.

> If we are to be emancipated through power, we shall master ourselves. Otherwise, we risk exercising an undue power which is the opposite of liberty, an abuse of power. Undue

power is a power through which we impose on others our judgments, appetites, or desires. In other words, the absence of mastery of our self implies the abuse of power over others. (Aghasaleh, 2018, p. 105)

Connectedness or Segregation: Digital Tribalism

Another aspect of post-truth conditions that educators should worry about is the creation of *alternate realities*. In the second presidential candidate debate of 2016, Clinton said Trump lives "in an alternate reality" (Transcript of the Second Debate, 2016, n.p.). Although I agree with her, I realize that he is not alone. In fact, more than 60 million American adults live that reality, and the problem is that *our* reality does not intersect with *their* reality. That is what made the 2016 election a wake-up call and a painful learning experience as we learn about the polarization and tribalism that is a post-truth feature.

At a time when technology is being celebrated for encouraging connectedness, cross-cultural communication, and facilitating access and inclusiveness, a strong and growing countertrend is also identified as digital tribalism. Digital technology and social networks enhance ties to family and close friends. They also serve to find those with whom we share important affinities, ranging from genomes to beliefs to lifestyle choices (Brown, 2011). Social networks, driven by artificial intelligent algorithms, are strong vehicles to create safe spaces for users, but they also nurture confirmation biases (Nickerson, 1998) that give the delusion that *everybody* thinks and acts like the users. The social network feeds are intelligently designed to show users the type of content that is more likely to be *liked* (bought) and posted by those like-minded people with whom the users tend to interact. This is a slippery slope of creating segregated realities and digital tribalism.

This segregation and disconnectedness did not happen overnight. This trend was predictable as we continued to push our *professional* agendas and is also fueled by our pragmatist and utility-oriented tendencies. It is an unquestioned assumption among scholar-activists that they should pick their battles. Over the past few years, my teachers, comrades, and mentors have told me several times that I could not fight *all* battles and needed to pick *my* battle, ignoring the fact that the battles are as agentic as I, and they would pick me as well. This mindset guided us to focus on specific issues—most definitely those that directly affect *us*, as individuals. I have been asked why I call myself a feminist and why I care about forms of oppression that do not directly affect *my* own life. In fact, we have been trained to advocate for *our* own interests in a nicely wrapped shell, so-called *professionalism*. There is no guarantee that being professional and acting professionally will protect us from post-truth. On the contrary, this professionalism has contributed to segregation and disconnectedness, which is hand in hand with post-truth. Also, as activists, we trusted the sectarianism fed by professionalism and called ourselves LGBTQ activists, Women's Rights activists, Immigrant Rights activists, etc. Indeed, post-truthers did not defeat us; we failed ourselves. We nurtured post-truth when we, as an LGBTQ community, assumed that assaults on the community of color were merely *their* problem. We contributed to post-truth when we, as the Black Lives Matter movement, thought oppression against the Muslim community was just *their* issue. We fueled post-truth when we, as religious minorities, felt that equal marriage rights were not *our* problem. We perpetuated post-truth when we, as men, thought objectification of women was only *their* problem. We created scattered, disconnected, and defenseless islands and ignored the fact that, when tides come, all islands will be drowned. We became post-truthers when we did

not get engaged in the conversation, argument, and/or fight with our family members, acquaintances, students, teachers, colleagues, and neighbors when uncomfortable topics arose. We enacted post-truth when we did not speak up when we saw and heard sexist language and norms in our workplace. We embodied post-truth when we saw racist acts in our towns and kept silent. We entertained post-truth when we pretended that we did not hear "locker room chats." We were defeated when we did not fight for the underdog because we did not want to risk our positions, welfare, or relaxing times.

But more than that, we were guilty when we dismissed those who expressed or practiced sexism, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, etc. and called them "deplorable" instead of finding a way to educate them. We assumed our educational privilege would protect us. We acted so *professionally* that we did not engage in the conversation with residents of the *other* realities because they did not speak *our* language. We should feel guilty of dismissing this population. Remember! These are the same essential questions that I had in my multicultural education classes for my preservice teachers; i.e., "How can we teach those who are different from us?" This has become my new project—to address children of the Trumpsters who are not rare. I had told many of my colleagues before the 2016 election that, even if Trump lost the race, we would still have a big group of people who relate to him and that it is on us to educate them. What are their "funds of knowledge" (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2006)? How should we understand a woman in a rally who wore a shirt that, in bold font, reads, "Trump can grab my," followed by an arrow that points to her vagina (Jacobs, 2016)? Where should I start the conversation with her if I am supposed to create an inclusive education for all students, including perhaps her own children? It is our weakness that we only know how to communicate with those who want to hear us and would agree with us. We are afraid of disagreement, and we appreciate compliments and likes. We have been trained not to express our disagreement, which leads us to this delusion that most people agree with us. We are very smart to keep ourselves safe in our sanity islands, secret networks, and/or safe spaces. We perfectly utilized denial mechanisms of blocking, unfriending, and sheltering in Pantsuit Nation safe spaces to suit ourselves and perpetuate the delusion that we are safe.

During her concession speech, Clinton said the nation is "more deeply divided than we thought" (Clintons, 2016), but it was too late to confess. She was right; looking at the election results breakdown, racial, gender, faith, class, and educational disparity is vivid (Tyson & Maniam, 2016). Indeed, education has the strongest correlation with 2016 voting patterns. I do not believe that love trumps hate. I rather think education trumps fear and terror. And, education is not doable without interaction and understanding. Let's come out of our caves. The storm has already come, and all of us have been struck. "We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now" (attributed to Martin Luther King, Jr.). Let's acknowledge the reality of the Other (whoever the Other is) and try to intersect with their reality. It is totally fine to fight and argue with them. It is even normal to be angry at them and feel they are the enemy—enemies of justice. However, it is not ethical nor helpful to ignore, belittle, or dismiss them. Please, feel free to respond, comment, disagree, talk back, speak up, but please, do not dismiss. As Audre Lorde (2012) wrote,

> My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. (p. 41)

Acknowledgments

Disclaimer

Notes

1. Executive Order 13769, titled "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States," often referred to as the Muslim ban or the travel ban, was an executive order by United States President Donald Trump. Executive Order 13769 lowered the number of refugees to be admitted into the United States in 2017 to 50,000, suspended the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) for 120 days, suspended the entry of Syrian refugees indefinitely, directed some cabinet secretaries to suspend entry of those whose countries do not meet adjudication standards under U.S. immigration law for 90 days, and included exceptions on a case-by-case basis. Homeland Security lists the following countries as in that category: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.

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