

Democracy's College, Episode 52

Critiquing the 'Critiques for Transformation' Book with Lorenzo Baber and Heather McCambly



Host Sal Nudo: Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at occrl.illinois.edu.

In this episode, Drs. Lorenzo D. Baber and Heather McCambly provide context on the origins and content of their book proposal and the eventually published volume titled *Critiques for Transformation: Reimagining Colleges and Communities for Social Justice*, a book that they and their colleagues developed during the trying years of the pandemic.

Lorenzo Baber: Hello. Thank you for joining us today on Democracy's College podcast. My name is Lorenzo Babler, director of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership. In this episode, I am thrilled to be joined by my co-host, Heather McCambly, who is an assistant professor of higher education at the University of Pittsburgh. And we are going to talk about our new co-edited volume, which came out in April: *Critiques for Transformation: Reimagining Colleges and Communities for Social Justice*. Heather, welcome. Thanks for joining me today.

Heather McCambly: Yeah, thanks so much for having me. I'm always excited to keep thinking and learning together. You always push me to figure out something new, so just don't push me too hard today.

Lorenzo Baber: [Laughs]

Heather McCambly: And y'all can find the book, or the edited volume, at infoagepub.com or through Amazon, Barnes & Noble and other book selling providers of your choice.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah, so again, we thank you in advance for your support and purchasing this volume. Hopefully it will be useful for your own research or teaching or policymaking as you move forward.

Today, we just wanted to talk and provide a little bit of context about how we came to develop the book proposal and the volume, talk about insights on our overarching goal for the book, our conversations, which started years ago, pre-pandemic, about four years ago, feels a lot longer, but we continued it over the pandemic and other difficult times.

We also want to talk a little about how we identified the topics and potential authors and think through, together, about how you may use the volume in your courses and your policy development in your discussions about theory to practice.

This will be the first Democracy's College podcast on the book, with future episodes focused on specific chapters with author; so authors will join us on the podcast and talk a little deeper about their particular chapters.

But this podcast, we want to kind of set the context for those future conversations and insights by giving a summary of the volume and chapter contents. As Heather mentioned, you can find the book on the Information Age Publishing website or your preferred online vendors.

Well, yeah, in 2009, 2019, excuse me, actually, I had just moved to Chicago, and Dr. McCambly was then a graduate student at Northwestern University. I was at Loyola, and we had known each other through actually working at OCCRL, in our previous affiliations with OCCRL, and had kind of just started conversations.

One thing I appreciate about Heather, she talks about me pushing her thoughts. Heather is a wonderful, forward-thinking scholar, and so, just talking through about some of the challenges for social justice work through policy and practice and postsecondary education, and then kind of some of the major challenges. In the book, we kind of identified two major challenges that we wanted to address. And the first was the dominant framing of higher education as a neutral, apolitical space crafted solely from principles of merit. And I would say that that challenge is actually more *now* than it was even four years ago.

And then the second challenge we wanted to address is challenging the ideas that conversations about social justice and postsecondary education are often siloed by sectors. So, we have conversations among community colleges and then conversations among four-year institutions, but never together. We often think about it siloed by level of education, so undergraduate versus graduate have siloed conversations around social justice; among

academic services siloed from student services. So, because higher education is *such* a vast terrain, that presents a unique challenge for understanding consistent threads of oppression that are situated across the complex system of colleges and universities.

To address this challenge, we wanted to bring together a volume that kind of connected the silos together rather than tease them apart, in an effort to kind of deconstruct consistent, oppressive norms of theory and practice and provide direction towards socially just reconsiderations *across* the various postsecondary contexts. Ultimately, we identify chapters that provided introduction of normative practices that reinforce material and cultural oppression; challenge those assumptions and then offered recommendations for redeveloping practices that center the well-being and success of all individuals, but particularly students from underserved identities and those underserved by the practices that we highlight in each chapter.

So, the book itself is divided into three sections, and again, we emphasize not just critiques but critiques for transformation. And so, each of the sections starts with the thought about transforming. And so, the first section is on transforming postsecondary pedagogies. The second section is focused on a set of chapters thinking about transforming campus and culture. And then, finally, the third section is a set of chapters focused on transforming systems and structures. And through these sections we bring together, again, critical scholars from across the country with varied research focus on postsecondary education, in an effort to provide a comprehensive understanding of social justice across various educational contexts.

That's just a little bit about our goals and, you know, as you purchase the book and read it, you can kind of map, relisten to this podcast after you're done and see how well we did. But I did want to turn over to Heather now to talk a little bit about insights of how we developed these conversations and how we use those conversations to develop this book.

Heather McCambly: I think it's interesting because when you kind of lay it out it sounds really logical. It sounds sequential. But I remember what happened, I remember ASHE 2019; we're at a reception in Portland. It was still, at that point, you and Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher saying, 'Hey, do you want to join us as a group of three?' She is now my dean here at the University of Pittsburgh.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah, nice shout-out Eboni. Love you.

Heather McCambly: And I was, yes, we love you, all your support. And I was just like, I mean, I'm going to learn from the masters here. It's going to be amazing. And that was November. And so, we had about three months where we started to hit the ground running. And we would go to Emerald City Cafe in Chicago, best breakfast tacos, at least in the northern [part of the city], you know, in our area.

Lorenzo Baber: Yes. They came up in the book because they definitely fueled us [laughs].

Heather McCambly: I know. They had books around, too. We were like, 'Just put it in.'

Lorenzo Baber: Right.

Heather McCambly: And at the time, I remember we were part of a series. We were supposed to be part of a series. And the series really wanted us to have kind of a P-20 focus. So, we were thinking about, okay, how do we want to do that? How do we want to bring authors together with a critical view? And we're making some good progress. And then March 2020 hit, and I believe shortly after the book series was cancelled, if I remember correctly.

Lorenzo Baber: Correct, yeah.

Heather McCambly: And so, because I'm your academic little sister, I'm just going to, like, bother you a little bit, like, in true Lorenzo fashion, you were like, 'All right, well, that was fun. Never mind. I'm tired.' [Laughing] And I was, like truly stubborn. I was like, 'No. Come on.' You were like, all right, so we kept going.

Lorenzo Baber: Persistent. How about use the word persistent, not stubborn?

Heather McCambly: Persistent.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah.

Heather McCambly: Persistent. Yeah, and then so that we had certain number of submissions that we already had on hand. So, I remember we kind of looked at them and we're like, all right, we have Eric Castro on deck, Erin Doran, Rosemary Perez, Raquel Rall. We're like, wow, this is like a *dope* group of early- to mid-career scholars of color, and they're really united around using critical frameworks to *push* their areas of research in, like, really novel directions. They're all challenging constructs of power that often go unexamined. You know, we're talking about boards, for example, right? This is right at the beginning of, you know, Raquel Rall, Dimitri Morgan and others, Felicia Commodore, coming in and saying, 'Yeah, we got to look at this board composition and the power they have.'

And so, we were kind of looking at that in light of what was going on in the summer of 2020 after the murders of Brianna Taylor and George Floyd. And so many, too many, others. And we're thinking, okay, so we're feeling a little useless here as academics. [Laughs] How do we push what critical research is for, right? What can it *do* that other forms of research can't? And how can we, I don't know, how can we feel useful in this moment?

I remember we were talking about something that had been on my mind that I'd been thinking a lot from one of my femtors, an incredible theoretician, Dr. Shirin Vossoughi at Northwestern University and something she kind of instilled in us through her teaching and her writing is, you know, if all we do is critique in critical research, we *lose* something. So how do we also dream and build *while* we do it. And so, I remember we started to feel like, hey, that's something we

could do in this volume. And I think that was kind of a turning point in how we brought everything together.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah, those are really good points and it's just, like, it was a weird moment, right? Like, we had these ideas, kind of got stopped by, you know, *nothing* to do with us, but just kind of the context of the situation, what's going on around us. And again, I want to give you credit for, again, your persistence. You were right, I was kind of like, oh well, we tried. I mean, circumstances were against us, let's move forward with something else. And you were like, no, we've got something here. We got something to say. We've got some great folks around us who are forward-thinking, who have this kind of radical imagination for thinking about not what is but what could be. And again, moving beyond just identifying what is, and critiquing what it is, but really thinking about what could be and giving audiences the opportunity with tools, knowledge and tools, to really transform, right? And so, you know, I just want to say I appreciate it.

The other thing I will say, you won't say, is that we actually *did* submit this to another publishing venue, and they rejected us because they said it was too, what was it, too general, I believe, like, we were just going too, remember that?

Heather McCambly: Too broad.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah, too broad. And then, again, I was just kind of like, okay, well, strike two. We tried again. You know, it is what it is, and you're like, nope. We're going to try for something else. Again, I always appreciate your persistence and getting us through and pushing.

And speaking of pushing, I think one of the things that's really valuable for this volume is the set of scholars that we identified. Again, forward-thinking folks who are really pushing the boundaries, scholarly boundaries, in our field. You know, we thought through people that we were connected with, as well as people that we had interacted with at ASHE and AERA and kind of pitching our thoughts and them saying, yeah, this is something that is great.

But even with that, some of the people that we know, as well as some who don't know, but some of the people we know, even when they presented their abstracts, you're just kind of like, oh, wow, this is not even where I thought you were going, right? So, I think about Dian Squire, right, and Tara Milliken, the co-authors, and their work on the colonizing of student affairs, right? As a former student-affairs professional myself, you know, I was just kind of like, wow, I never thought about it in this capacity as a way of thinking about the normative features of student affairs and some of the practices that elevate, kind of dehumanization through systems and processes and how to get past that I thought was really, really insightful. And again, as I read the abstracts and then thought through about how amazing this volume could be, I think that's a great example, as well as identifying folks, and we both did this, folks that we knew but the other person didn't know. So, I think of Aireale Rodgers, right, as a great example of that. I, you know, knew of Dr. Rodgers, now Dr. Rodgers, work, but that was your homie. And so, when

we got that initial chapter abstract on Black feminism and the work around curriculum, you know, I was just blown away.

You know, one of the things that I really enjoyed about this volume and putting it together is, like you said, we got a lot of early-career, mid-career folks who aren't yet settled in the ways that they are thinking, right, and are really still thinking through the criticality that's needed to push higher education. And again, this was in 2019-2020, so we also have to acknowledge the ways that they pushed through with all the challenges that were going on, both in terms of the pandemic, in terms of the, just, *trauma* – racialized violence, trans violence, other forms of violence against oppressed people, and even, you know, going all the way to January 6, right? [Laughs] I remember, I think I was like reading a draft with the TV on, thinking like what a crazy time. And so, also acknowledge that our colleagues really pushed through and just created some meaningful pieces that I honestly think will stand the test of time, not only in the moment, but in the ways that future generations will say that, you know, there were a group of scholars who were dreaming beyond what is and could think about what could be. And so, hopefully, it doesn't just get contained in this book, but then they can also think about ways in which this book helped elevate policy and practice through graduate education and through policy development.

So, I don't know. Do you want to talk a little bit about how we think this can be used, this volume?

Heather McCambly: Yeah. I also, as you were talking, though, I was thinking about how, because you're right, I'm suddenly realizing, like, we didn't really have to chase anybody down for chapters, and we didn't have to do that much running after people even about our peer reviews, which was *unusual* in the moment. I mean, we all saw, like, actual empirical papers coming out about how much that period of time was affecting delays and authorship, especially among women's scholars, to be honest, right, because we have a lot of caregiving duties. I know I did in that time.

Because something I learned from our authors at AERA, when we did that panel, that I hadn't thought about from their perspective was the pieces that are in this volume were sort of like dream pieces for some of the folks, right, like things that didn't have an exact home because they are kind of pushing the field in certain ways. And so there was kind of a lot of joy within our group at that AERA panel as we all discussed what it was like to produce this work and to have a home for it. It just makes me wonder, right, if the nature of it was part of what helped it not be such a painful process in a really painful time. So, it's maybe something I'll ask folks later on.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah, it just felt like a good space to be in, right? Like, whether we were just, you know, focusing on reading drafts or talking with authors or talking with even the reviewers. It was a good space to be in. It kind of kept your mind into something that you knew was important, right? Even though there was chaos all around you and you kind of didn't know what the heck was going to happen in all our other lives, but this was an opportunity to kind of say,

with good people, doing good work, taking good feedback, right, that we could kind of focus on this as a space we *wanted* to be a part of and actually needed, right?

Heather McCambly: Yeah. And then we adjusted in our work on the intro and my work with Doctor Rodgers on the conclusion. We were constantly, and I know the authors were too, kind of adapting to what we were learning. I mean, it's so funny that the fallout of some of the 2020 through 2022 period was all about learning loss

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah.

Heather McCambly: When it's like, no, we all learned *a lot*. And our kids did too. So, like, let's not, yeah, we won't even go there.

Lorenzo Baber: Right? Yeah.

Heather McCambly: But I know we learned a lot, right? And that was getting kind of folded into the book. And so, I think one of my, you know, hopes and dreams for this book in terms of how it gets taken up: We're looking across different topics, so you're not going to find, you know, all student affairs or all policy or all, like, pedagogy, but some of each. And thinking about it like this is a tool, I *hope*, right, for graduate students or research practitioners to sort of *play* and test out for themselves as they look at how are these scholars using theory and critical analysis in applied ways that carry political weight? You know, for example, in our introduction, something that we wrote as we really digested the magnitude of the political backlash we were experiencing, kind of in the wake of such powerful solidarity stands out to me. I just wanted to read it in the intro. We said, "This volume centers critical theories for the very reason that anti-equity proponents are frantically working to further obscure them. Because we recognize that critical theories as analytic tools prompt us to ask, 'different and perhaps better questions.' End quote. That's from Lee Patel, 2021, about the oppressive systems in which we reside. "This is a project of critical research and theorizing design not merely to critique but to imagine something beyond our current research."

And then we start talking about history, right? "We define criticality broadly as lenses on the world that help us get underneath or on the other side of the neoliberal postsecondary industrial complex marked by Reagan's 1968 speech. We deploy criticality because market-based economic lenses on human resource development fundamentally undermine our struggle towards transformative and humane futures. The neoliberal project encourages researchers, leaders, and students to keep their eye on individual gaps, limiting higher education's role to that of a mechanism for labor development."

So, I think we really kind of got into it about, like, what have we been missing or what do we miss when we comply with kind of the neoliberal way of understanding higher ed research, right? In terms of employment, in terms of earnings, in terms of closing 'achievement gaps.' And I think we did a lot of work to that end in the volume. On the other end, like, I'm still grappling with.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah.

Heather McCambly: I have practitioners, when I do talks now, kind of ask me, 'Well, what do we do? Like, I'm in Texas? I'm in Florida, I'm in North Carolina. Like, what do we do in the face of the fact that we're being told shut down your equity, diversity, inclusion offices? Don't talk about race. All of these things. The violence against transgender people, not only physically on campus but through policy. And I think one of the things that I was learning as we worked on this volume and that I'm still trying to figure out how to talk about, and I know this might be something you can speak to, is, you know, the answer isn't in all of the kind of traditional ways we've been taught to think about 'intervention and higher education,' right? It's *not* a student-bridge program, right. [Laughs] Like, that's not going to cut it. It's about political organizing. And so, as I think about as scholars, as teachers, as practitioners, how are we going to organize ourselves to be part of the pushback against the backlash? And, you know, that's scary. That's hard work. But look, like, I was looking at the news today. Florida University is set to approve the classical test. Have you looked at what's on the classical test?

Lorenzo Baber: No.

Heather McCambly: I mean, we're just getting, like, white heteronormative, like, Judeo-Christian, not even Judeo-Christian, like, ideology trying to replace the SAT. Things are getting wild, like, this is Reagan 2.0 on steroids. And it's like, yeah, this is political.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah, it really goes back to the original point that higher education has never been a value-neutral or politically neutral space, right? And also, it's not a space that reflects the societal norms, right? That's another thing that people talk [about]. And Isaac Gottesman, another chapter contributor-historian, talks through that a little bit in his chapter that higher education is complicit in the shaping of society, right? And so, when we think about that over the last 50 years and, you know, from the speech that kind of pushed higher education, the Reagan speech that many historians point to as the point of departure for higher education moving towards a, you know, privatization, private good as opposed to kind of a public space. And, of course, that's overlapped with the kind of changing demographics of our society, so, again, what college is for and who college is it for? Their intersectional, right, they intersect.

Like you said, *that* part it should be less contested, but it is in terms of higher education being an apolitical, a historical space. So then it just becomes a terrain of, like, ideological battleground, right, between equity and social justice and neoliberalism and capitalism. And certain institutions even have more pressure than others in terms of being those political and ideological battles because, you know, the funding is tied to those things, right, as your work talks about in one of our chapters.

And one of the things I enjoy about this book is that, you know, this is what we think, right? But we're not also, you know, it's not solid, right? So, there's some things that we may have gotten right that others will extend on in a different direction, and there's some things that, you know,

we got wrong. And so, you know, inviting people to critique the critique and filling in the gaps that are existing I think is also important, again, towards the overall focus on equity and social justice as the space, as the place that higher education contributes to. I think it's important.

It's odd that people think these things are new because they're not, right, and I know it's very frustrating as I think sometimes, you know, people might read this book and especially recommendations and say, you know, that's just a utopic view of what could be. But I think, you know, we still have to maintain that even in the crazy times that we live in. Because I think that one of the things that has fueled progress is hope, and certainly progress doesn't go as fast as we want, and we're not suggesting that, but that radical hope is what kind of sustains us in pushing that rock up the hill, right, especially in the collective effort, which I think this volume represents in the moment.

Heather McCambly: I remember as Aireale and I were working on the conclusion, having read all of the chapters, we were thinking about this point about enacting radical hope. And I won't find it right now, and that doesn't matter, y'all can find it and read it, but something really that we kind of *sat* with was: Why do we stick with radical hope? What's the importance of dreaming? Yes, sometimes my students are like, okay, but is dreaming the opposite of practice, and it's like, absolutely not. It's the kind of forebear for it. I mean, when we think about whose reality are we living in right now? Right? Someone dreamed this up. Like, the reality that we're living in right now has so many components of Reagan-era conservatives' dream of the types of metrics that higher education would be governed by, and we're only seeing that kind of getting pushed further and further in again today, even as we've taken some ground. So just remembering that a lot of the political ties we would push against, you know, those were dreamed up too. We can stick with those as that's our reality. That's just. No, they dreamed it first!

Lorenzo Baber: Right.

Heather McCambly: Right? And so, if we're going to push back, we have to have a better vision than incremental change. So, at least that's how I talk to students when they're like, 'I don't want to dream. I just need to practice.' I'm like, these are not separate things.

Lorenzo Baber: Right. Yeah, and that's a great place to maybe pause, at least for this episode. Do want to talk a little bit about our plans for future episodes?

Heather McCambly: Yeah. So, for the rest of this fall, so we'll also do a couple of podcasts in the spring. But for this fall, we have two additional podcast episodes that will be released. The next one is going to be a sit-down between you, Lorenzo, and Dr. Isaac Gottesman from Connecticut College. He's going to join us to talk about his chapter on why history matters, *Critical Approaches and Higher Education Scholarship*, which is just a beautiful and deep kind of dive into the multidisciplinary literatures and uses of different critical theories, with attention to critical race theory, which in education sometimes we miss how far back and how broad this thing called, you know, being critical is as a researcher. And so, he kind of helps us get a little bit

deeper than we often do into questions like how are the critical ideas and my scholarship connected to a specific tradition of critical ideas, and how are the critical ideas in my work connected to the history of academic movement? And then also, how is my work connected to the history of *struggle* and social movements? And again, these are *so* oriented towards action and towards thinking about this connection of research to social action, and this kind of helps us engage with the political battles of the moment with fresh eyes.

And then second, this fall, I will have the incredible pleasure of sitting down with Dr. Rosie Perez, of Michigan, and Dr. Aireale Rodgers, of Wisconsin-Madison, to bring their work into conversation with each other. So, for Rosie, this is her collaborative chapter with Claire Robbins, Cheryl Montgomery, and L. Wesley Harris on imagining U.S. graduate education in ways that integrate social identity, climate, and critical ways of knowing and engaging with equity and justice.

And for Dr. Rodgers, it's her chapter with Mary Senyonga and Sarah Toutant using visionary fiction towards the praxis of Black feminism in higher education. These are both dope, incredible chapters, so I promise you the conversation is going to be fire.

Lorenzo Baber: I'm looking forward to listening to those, and I think it's going to be great. So, again, Heather, thank you so much for joining us. And I, again, I want to remind the audience that the Democracy's College podcast is sponsored by the Office of Community College Research and Leadership. This is just one of our series of podcasts. So, we have a number of topics that we discuss and present across the P-20 spectrum related to our work at OCCRL. And so we look forward to you joining us not only for this particular series, but also other podcasts from Democracy's College by OCCRL.

But for now, again, thank you, Heather, for your time and we look forward to hearing those future podcasts. And everyone else who is listening, I hope you have a great day.

Heather McCambly: Thank you!

Lorenzo Baber: Appreciate you spending time with us.

Heather McCambly: Bye.

Sal Nudo: Tune in for future Democracy's College podcasts that will go more in depth about the book *Critiques for Transformation* by covering specific book chapters by the authors who wrote them. The episodes will feature chapter authors Isaac Gottesman of Connecticut College, Rosemary Perez of the University of Michigan, and Aireale Rodgers of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Background music for this podcast was provided by FASSounds from the website Pixabay. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to equity, justice, and excellence in education for all students.