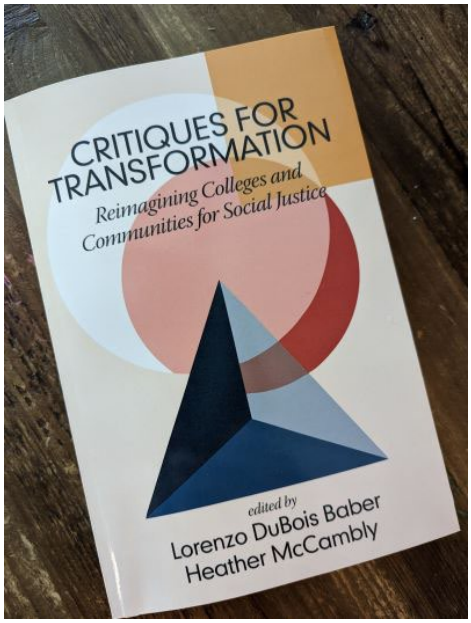
Democracy's College, Episode 54

Critiquing the 'Critiques for Transformation' Book with Heather McCambly, Rosemary Perez, and Aireale J. Rodgers



Sal Nudo: Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in the 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, OCCRL affiliate member Heather McCambly talks with Dr. Rosemary Perez and Dr. Aireale J. Rodgers about the chapters they contributed to in the volume *Critiques for Transformation: Reimagining Colleges and Communities for Social Justice*, a book that was co-edited by Dr. McCambly and Dr. Lorenzo D Baber.

Host Heather McCambly: Hello and thank you for joining us today on Democracy's College. My name is Heather McCambly. I'm an assistant professor of higher education at the University of Pittsburgh. And I'm a research affiliate with the Office of Community College Research and Leadership.

This is our third podcast episode and conversation with authors featured in the volume *Critiques for Transformation: Reimagining Colleges and Communities for Social Justice*, edited by myself and Dr. Lorenzo Baber.

Today, I have the pleasure to be joined by two of our chapter authors. Dr. Rosemary Perez, associate professor in the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education at the University of Michigan, and co-author along with Claire Robbins, Cheryl Montgomery, and L. Wesley Harris Jr. of the chapter Reimagining U.S. Graduate Education: A Critical Integrative Analysis of Socialization, Climate, and Social Identity Perspective. Welcome, Rosie.

And second, Dr. Aireale J. Rodgers, assistant professor, Anna Julia Cooper fellow at the University of Wisconsin- Madison's Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis. Ariel is co-author along with Mary Senyonga and Sarah M. Toutant of the chapter Writing Ourselves Into a Just Future Using Visionary Fiction Towards a Praxis of Black Feminisms in Higher Education. Welcome, Ariel.

We're here together to talk about these chapters, but also, to some extent, there kind of origin story and meaning to us personally. Let's start on a personal note. Let's talk about what is your most toxic writing habit? Aireale, let's start with you.

Aireale J. Rodgers: We're starting with the hard-hitting questions here, I see.

Heather McCambly: That's right.

Aireale J. Rodgers: My most toxic writing habit has to be editing while I'm writing. I have a hard time just kind of letting my ideas just flow onto the page and then going back to revise or refine, you know, how I'm saying what I'm trying to say. I tend to collapse those two processes into one, which makes the writing process a bit arduous for me. So that's the one that I'm committed to continuing to work on.

Heather McCambly: Beautiful. And that reminds me of Dr. Shirin Vossoughi, her saying to us that I know I've repeated before: Quantity, quality poetry. I always try to remember, just write a lot. And most of it's going to be really bad, and then we'll figure it out from there. Rosie, what about you?

Rosemary Perez: Well, Aireale, my habit is quite similar. I will say that I sometimes, at least in my first draft, overedit myself, kind of worrying about precision or getting the idea right that I don't write it at all. Like, I have really beautiful words in my head and they don't translate into my fingers. And I find that I don't use the strategy that I tell my students, which is just record yourself talking because most of the ideas that orally, when you go to type them, you're struggling. I rarely, since the dissertation, have done that, and I probably should return to it because usually when I can say orally and edit, then it's much clearer than the first thing I tried to type, which was, like, you know, a few words, backspace, backspace, backspace, backspace. Overedit! And the next pass and you look and you're like, wow, I have written three pretty decent sentences.

Heather McCambly: The day's work sometimes. I don't know if mine is sort of in the opposite realm. I think about it as overuse of the em dash, but what I actually mean is the way that my own ADHD shows up in my writing. So, it's like I have a thought, nestled in a thought, nestled in a thought, and, unfortunately, I don't always edit that out. So, it's something I really have to remind myself that people don't necessarily want to read in a spiral, even though I find it delightful. So, we'll keep working on that.

All right, so now that we've made rooms for some of our hidden toxicity, but also just relatability, let's talk about that post-revision, beautiful final product that I've had the pleasure of reading in multiple forms in your chapters. So, I would love to hear a little bit about kind of the origin story, if you will, of the chapter that you shared in this volume, and also how it changed as you developed it. So, I will kick this over to Rosie to get started.

Rosemary Perez: Yeah, so our chapter was actually developed as part of designing a study. So we, Dr. Robbins and I, were the co-PIs on really like a pilot project. We were really interested in understanding how do students learn about diversity, equity, and inclusion across disciplines and fields. Part of that was really reflected in our own experiences working in higher education and student affairs as faculty, but then also being situated in institutions that were *heavily* dominated by STEM. And really, everyone's using the language, like, just terms like DEI. But we're not talking about the same things at all. And how students were coming to learn about these topics were struggling when they had deeper understandings than maybe faculty or peers in a context was really affecting that profoundly, affecting them.

You know, when you're trying to design a study and secure resources, you have to come up with a way to situate yourself theoretically. And we tried like all the traditional lenses and we're like this is not enough. Like, I write a ton about socialization and I really struggled with the idea that it was identity-evasive. I tend to power dynamics in that process in a real explicit way, like power from the sense of systemic oppression and really wanting to attend to that. And Dr. Robbins and I, being folks that are deeply engaged in work that is developmental, really thinking about where does human development fall and where do our identities come into play with how we experience graduate education, this learning.

You know, and then we were also really trying to attend to the idea of sociocultural learning because, oddly enough, Aireale's work, maybe other work that you've done, really speaks to this: Graduate education literature profoundly does not seek to learning, which is stunning, right? We're training experts, so we just have all these things that were on our minds relevant to this study we were designing. So, we honestly did some work. We spent a lot of time reading and trying to figure out how did these ideas connect? What is going on here?

I will say the origin story came with us, Dr. Robbins and I, sitting with Wesley and Cheryl, our co-authors, over Zoom, because we were at different institutions, literally we would read stuff and then let's talk about it. And then, let's draw pictures! Like, well, how are we making sense of this? And so, we were just trying to draw our own experiences, like how has graduate education informed our thinking around DEI. And so, literally, it both was like an iterative writing, thinking, and drawing collective process kind of led us to literally like a picture. We started out with a picture first, and then kind of worked backwards to explain our ideas, which I think is kind of unconventional. Usually people like, 'Create this figure to reflect this prose.' We're like, no, we're starting kind of the opposite direction and kind of working through.

What's interesting is we developed this framework, we wrote up a wonderful paper, we proposed it, presented it at a conference in our field at ASHE. And I think it was generally really well received. But when we tried to publish it, frankly we got told, like, who are you to be creating new frameworks?

Heather McCambly: Hmmm.

And more than once. More than once. It was like I don't think we need new frameworks or theories, and particularly in one space, which a senior colleague was trying to say. I think this was really well suited to this very well-known kind of selective, invited space. Basically, we got told y'all don't have enough lines on your CVs. You're not known enough to be in this space. In which, honestly, I know a lot of other folks who are much less advanced, career wise, than me who had been invited. So, it was about being known.

And so the process of developing this was both, like, a really intellectual process and a real negotiation about where prestige and whose ideas matter. It's not even rigor. The quibbles were never about that concept. It was about you need us as people. And so I think that that was a really challenging, frankly, like learning. Talk about socialization and DEI learning. Like, how do you talk through that with your graduate student collaborators when they ask you something like, 'There's no actual feedback here about that content.' I'm like, no. How do you talk through? What does that tell you about this field? Do you still want to be in it?

Like, so we were also going through the model collectively together as we were writing it. I think, honestly, after several rejections, and particularly *that one*, which was, like, very hurtful at the time, we just sat on it for a really long time. So we are really grateful for being invited, you know, to contribute this contribution because Dr. Baber, one of your co-editor, I think, kind of knew we'd been in it.

How I think it evolved in the process of working with you as editors, I feel like when not in a journal, even though the space was small, we get to be more direct. And in particular, you helping us as editors be *much* more direct in claiming our stance. Like, it was there, but we had softened it along the way, so, like, when we would talk about the ideas, they were just much more forward than how some of the text was written. And a lot of that was in negotiation with editors and other journals, another audience.

The core ideas really stayed the same. I think what *changed* was that we were just more forward with our ideology. This kind of venue and space that you can't always get in journals. And I think it changed us in terms of really just being really aware, or differently aware, of *just* how the gatekeeping operates. Like, you always know it's there. I think you experience it in different ways, but having to go through it collectively with collaborators in our earlier career, and as you're also early career, it's not tenured, but really thinking through career pathway. I think that just made me even more clear about how I wanted it to operate in the academy. So it was both a content change, or a content growth, but also just more firmly planting me and not wanting to reproduce that as a scholar.

Heather McCambly: Yeah, that makes me think just that segway to Aireale about how you often think and share about disciplines and disciplining.

Aireale J. Rodgers: Yes, that's literally what I was thinking about. And I think that's a core part of the genesis of this project. For my qualifying exam, I did my Ph.D. at the University of Southern California, and for my qualifying exam I went down a *rabbit hole* reading about black feminisms, the black radical tradition, reading Cedric Robinson's work on black Marxism, which led me to Angela Davis's work and really trying to find more information and more truths, quite frankly, like more deep truths about the contours of the black radical tradition from a black feminist perspective, and really thinking about the ways that the field of education, particularly, kind of engages superficially, quite frankly, with critical theories of race and racialization. And so I found myself wanting to think about things, but realizing, like, I ain't got the range, actually, to think about this in the ways that I need to if I actually want to make a substantive and generative contribution to not only, like, disqualifying exam, but like to the field, right, and to practice.

And so I ended up reading some of the work that I was telling you all about. But also, I came to Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, and reading about Octavia Butler as a writer and then reading her work burst my world wide open. And this idea of writing speculative fiction as a way to practice the epistemologies and ontologies that we are committed to felt so generative to me, but I wasn't sure quite what to do with that. I'm like this feels like there's something there but I don't know how to do that.

And so when, Heather, you approached me about offering up something for this volume, that was what I was really excited to think about. And so I had personal and professional relationships with

Sarah. Sarah was a part of my cohort at USC. We were in the same higher education program. She was also contending with issues related to black feminisms in higher education. And Mary I had met through black women's writing group in LA, and Mary was a Ph.D. student at UCLA. And I know that Mary was also thinking through how to substantively engage with black feminisms towards reimagining higher education. And so I thought they would be ideal thought partners in this work. And so we decided to come together. We didn't anticipate that the bulk of the chapter would end up being a conversation between all of us.

But it's a really nice parallel to what Rosie was saying about how sometimes you just need to, like, get on Zoom and talk it out and figure out, like, okay, what is it, actually, that we are trying to do with the tools that we're using, and how is it that we're making sense of this collaboratively? That's kind of how the chapter came together: through a series of conversations, of contending with our own desires for our own academic learning and socialization within the academy, our disappointment, quite frankly, with our experiences of learning and teaching within the context of graduate education, and our hopes and desires based off of our engagement with black feminist foremothers and the lessons that we learned from engaging with them as an imperative to approach our work from a space that contends with not, like, how do I transform this institution? But how do I think outside of the bounds of the institution to create more generative learning pathways within them, potentially, and beyond them, right? So that's the origin story, I would say, of our work together.

Heather McCambly: Again, there was a reason we kind of brought you two together to speak in kind of one space. As you're both speaking, it's reminding me of kind of one piece from your chapter, Rosie, in the conclusion, where you're really talking about how this model that you're offering us and kind of how it foregrounds power, privilege, and oppression and making that more explicit in graduate education. But you said specifically how it affects who is taught, what is taught, and who and what is valued. And I'm thinking about how that's in conversation with what Aireale is sharing about what felt within and without the bounds of what you could share as central to your learning and your lenses as a scholar. And so it's really powerful to kind of hear you two in direct conversation, right, about how these systems of power are disciplining how we think, what we think, and therefore kind of what we might teach.

And, Aireale, I wonder if you might say a little bit more about what came up in conversation with your colleagues, or with your co-authors, about how this point of speculative fiction maybe gave you some new tools to think beyond those bounds.

Aireale J. Rodgers: Yeah, I really appreciate that question. One of the things that I'll say to begin to pick up on your initial point is something that I think about a lot within my work is, you know, you talked about disciplining, like, what we learn, what we teach, those things, and then as we know from folks in the learning sciences, socio-culturalist, particularly how those processes then begin to index who we become. And so, like, I think about the process of becoming, and I think that that was something that Mary, Sarah, and I were really contending with when we were writing this chapter. We were writing the chapter at a time where it was right before we were finishing up our programs, thinking about applying to jobs, and really contending with like, okay, what is possible here, right?

So, like, if my political and ethical commitments to the work are grounded in creating more livable and generative conditions for black women and fems, is that possible in that context, right? And so

what I think that black feminisms and speculative fiction as a method towards trying to embody black feminisms provided us was the permission to think beyond the bounds that we created, and to actually say, if you are committed to these political and ethical conditions that you're trying to create, actually, you can't do that thinking within the bounds of the institution, because the institution was created actually to disempower you. It's created to do all of the bad things that you're feeling. And so, when we try to think about, okay, what are spaces, actually? They may have felt good for us.

This is something that we actually caught ourselves in the chapter doing a lot, is that we would speak *to* the institution rather than *beyond* the institution. And so in the conversation, I kind of took the role of a facilitator. And so I was trying to be intentional about how do we have a conversation that is grounded within the context of black women and fems experiences within higher education, while not limiting ourselves to the logics, to the normative practices, to the ontoepistemologies of the institution itself. That is really hard. And so one of the lessons that really came up for us was that this is really hard work, and actually, we need time and space and resources to do this work well, if we want to do it at all.

And so, thinking about how do we create opportunities and possibilities for black women and fems at all levels of the institution, but thinking particularly about students to engage meaningfully, in the possibility of creating new futures for themselves in ways that don't belabor them to become coopted, right, by the university, but in self-determined and self-directed ways. I would say that was one of the bigger lessons for me is that it's hard work. It's *very* laborious in terms of cognitive energy, and so we need resources to actually support folks to do this if this is something that we're saying we're invested in as an institution. You can't say we're doing DEI, but actually we don't give people the time to actually think and design those processes.

Heather McCambly: I want to bless the listener with a couple of sentences, just actually the first two sentences, from your chapter because I think they captured me so much when I was reading them and they speak to kind of what you're getting at. You and your co-authors wrote, “In a fundamentally anti-black world, the persistent and unabashed assertion of black futures is a necessary intervention against routine material and ideological attacks on black life. Within higher education, postulation of black futurity is just as necessary.”

I kind of want to read that first because folks should read the full chapter because it's beautiful. And also the degree to which this spoke to our hope for the edited volume overall, right. And the idea of creating a space to engage in thinking about futurities in different ways and thinking about our work as critical scholars as having a place in the material project of creating fundamentally different and more liberatory futures.

And as, you know, we were writing kind of the intro to this volume, you know, one of our kind of grounding assertions is the recognition, we said, “Because we recognize that critical theories are analytic tools that prompt us to ask different and perhaps better questions,” and there we're citing Leigh Patel, ‘No study Without Struggle,’ “about the oppressive systems in which we reside.” This is a project of critical research in theorizing design not merely to critique, but to imagine something beyond our current reach. And I think both of your chapters do that work in different and beautiful ways, and I think part of what you're putting forward, Aireale, is a vision of what you were hoping a reader can take and do with what you were offering.

So, I kind of want to turn that back to you, Rosie. As you were exploring in this text, something of a genre that you couldn't fit in to other areas of our discipline, what were you able to kind of explore and offer here that you want folks to take away that might help them think about our futurities in higher education or their own work differently?

Rosemary Perez: As I was listening to Aireale talk and you, Heather, right, the thing that I want people to take away from my chapter and across the text, right, is that I feel like in higher ed, we use critical theory as a tool of deconstruction, you know, and that's what it's designed to do, right, to illuminate things that have been obscured on purpose so that we don't understand, or that we don't know how we're held subject to, or that we don't feel empowered to contest oppressive, harmful, violent systems. Like, that's all by design and critical theories is an excellent tool for problem-posing.

Sometimes, in the spirit of critique, particularly in the academy, you know, the energy is spent towards telling people – and I always tell my students this – we cannot spend all of our time telling everybody why they suck. It is important to raise critical questions. It is important to problem-pose and what role do we want to play in building new futures. What happens next after we burn it down, if we burn it? And I have found that my most critical students, the ones who are most deep into critical theory, when I asked the question of what is next, what do we want to imagine together, our imaginations get stifled. It gets really hard.

And so, the framework we created, or moved towards, was really in the spirit of trying to think through, 'We don't have to do graduate education the same.' Some of the structures might stay. Some of them might change, but it is equally important to think, what is the process? Not just the what we want students to do, but *how*. You can still have people develop a dissertation and cultivate their own scholarly voice in a way that doesn't have to be harmful or violent or identity-evasive. But there are different ways to do that.

So, I think we wrote it in the spirit of really critical hope, which is the spirit of the book, to really do more than problem-pose, but to think through what could this look like? I think particularly for those folks who might be faculty or academic administrators who read our chapter to also think through, how do we engage students in this process without capitalizing on their labor, and not in extractive ways? Because I think people will say, 'Oh, we'll work in partnership.' I'm like, well that, you know, sometimes when people try to use these frameworks, it's not really a partnership. You're going to ask, but you're not going to engage in real relationship building to think through and to reorienting.

And so I really hope that if people fully think through this model or at least portions of it, that that humanized process of graduate education, again, takes time, attention to relationship, and reciprocity. Those things are *core* if you're really committed to having graduate education be a more humanizing process. And that process of humanizing grad ed doesn't make it – and I don't know the word 'rigor' – but it doesn't make the other outcomes of scholarly development, generating research, thinking of new ideas, that doesn't take away from that. Often it enhances our ability to think and *be* in community better.

I've just really been sitting with this idea of time and investment. What time and energy do we want to invest in graduate education if we want to make it a less extractive, less harmful, and less violent enterprise for grad students. That's what I hope people take from this. There's just different ways of

how we do this. We can keep some of the structures, we can change the structures, but attention to the *how*, and with whom, is essential to spending more time with.

Heather McCambly: Your writings, collectively, both of you, and kind of working on this book, has really inspired the way that I work with graduate students and pushed me to try to figure out how to work with them on this muscle. The futurity, the radical hope, the critical hope *muscle*. In watching students respond to assignments that I've given, that I really try to scaffold, right, moving from critique, taking that critique that you grounded in literature and then moving to what would you create, and how is that kind of grounded in what you've learned. I can *see* them struggle in a way that I can, like, *feel* is watching them develop a new muscle. It's taught me so much about what it looks like to develop that critical hope to go along with that deconstruction, and it's not easy. The biggest thing I've learned is it's a *practice*, and I think also engaging with both of your chapters and thinking about speculative fiction, as well, helps me see, like, okay, how are you going to learn to write the future? Well, you're not going to learn it just by trying once. It's kind of trying and trying again.

Aireale J. Rodgers: I was really quickly going to say, I think also, something that came up for me, two things, as Rosie was speaking: First of all, thinking about this process of disciplining. It makes total sense why we as academics, burgeoning academics for graduate students, right, are underprepared to engage in imagination, to engage from a perspective of building rather than tearing down. Because we're taught to identify gaps, right? We're taught to deconstruct to say why something is wrong or inferior or how your one idea is going to change everything, and it's like, sure, yes, it can contribute in really meaningful ways. But the thought that anyone's idea, at this point, is the first time that anyone has had this idea in the course of human history. Let's be for real – probably not the case, right?

And so, what do we actually get, other than ego, pride, elitism, right, from engaging with our ideas in that way or to tear something down. And that's not to say that things don't need to be torn down. But I'm looking at, I have a Toni Morrison candle over there. You know, I think about how she talks about racism being a distraction. And so, I think, unfortunately, a lot of the critical scholarship in higher education kind of renders itself completely reactive to systems, to structures that deserve a reaction, right? Because they're problematic, they're harmful, they're violent, all of those things. And when we keep ourselves in a loop of being reactive rather than proactive, or rather than speculative, we could say, that type of labor actually does not go as far as it could.

And then the last thing that I'll say, relative to Rosie's comments, was what I was thinking about as you were talking, Rosie, is power. And, like, how do we get to a place where not only are we not being extractive in the labor that we are inviting minoritized folks to participate in, but also how do we create ways to fundamentally shift power relations such that not only am I giving you the tools and resources to labor towards this more just future. I am shifting the power dynamics such that you can do this in really self-empowered ways. And, like, I'm saying I trust you to do that. I'm here if you need me, but I trust that you will lead in this particular way in this work.

Yeah, I think about the ways that power shows up in material relations. Even in some of the most well-intended relationships, (if) the power dynamics don't shift, problematics will undoubtedly be the results of them.

Heather McCambly: You know, I'm wanting to take the spirit of this conversation, this spirit of transformation, this spirit of hope, this spirit of power-shifting, and I kind of want to move it into what we're experiencing right now.

So today is January 11, 2024, and we are, and we've been, in a really painful moment as we witnessed Israel's campaign of ethnic cleansing in Palestine and how this violence is playing out in particular ways on our campuses, right, as students and faculty enter into this fray through protests, through learning, discourse in forms of open political resistance, which have created incredible backlash.

And so today, the International Court of Justice in The Hague were bearing witness as survivors and descendants of apartheid resistance in South Africa, you know, beautifully take up the genocide case against Israel for the crimes against the people of Palestine. And I am reminded, as we sit with these court arguments, that the U.S. government supported the South African apartheid regime, just as it supports Israel today. And much like today, the student activists on our campuses across the world and in the U.S. *oppose* the support and spoke out about campaigns of resistance, boycott, and divestment when others didn't in support of South African liberation, and now in support of Palestine. And this included really notable organized movements that both U-W Madison and at Michigan.

So, I bring this up because, you know, first, just feeling that responsibility to make space to name the collective grief and violence that we're trying to make sense of together; and second; because as we sit with your words, put down on the page, you know, well over a year-plus ago, it struck me how prescient your thinking is to this moment on our campuses, at the intersection of student learning, socialization, and issues of justice, oppression, and futurity.

So, I guess what comes up for each of you as you've been sitting here digesting all of the media coming at us and all of your students experiences. I know I've been on Zoom with you, Aireale, when you've seen the pro-Palestine student movements and protests going past your office window and kind of been like, 'Okay, you know, when am I jumping out there?' But how is the work you've offered, how might it help us think differently about our identities as scholars and our work with students as they are responding to this moment, this political moment, and the heaviness and fear and violence coming at them and coming at us?

Aireale J. Rodgers: There is a quote that I wanted to read. It's a Yarish 2021 quote, and they're talking about the role of Octavia Butler and, like, kind of what Butler's intellectual and political project was contributing towards, and so, Yarish writes, "Butler's insistence that we sow the seeds of laboratory thought in and beyond the Earth grounds us in a soil that we all share, allows us to extend ourselves collectively and in solidarity toward a horizon of liberation and ultimately to build a world where institutions of oppression have not just vanished but will no longer re-appear."

And I think that that is what I hope that we can begin to do by leveraging speculative fiction as *one*, but not the only method, towards learning and becoming within the context of the academy, really contending with not only how do we tear things down like we were talking about, but how do we create the conditions under which this type of violence is *never possible* again?

One of the things that I have been really contending with, this is my first year as a professor, and I get emotional thinking about it, but I really think about what is the type of faculty member that I needed when I was in graduate school? Or the type of faculty member that many of my friends might have needed? How do I do my work in the academy in ways that minimize, because I know that there's no way to fully *eliminate* the possibility of me enacting violence. Tethering myself to this institution means that I'm complicit to violence in particular types of ways, and that's been really hard for me to think about. I know it's necessary to really be critically reflexive about what each decision I make and how I wield my power within the context of this institution means for the day-to-day lives and experiences of the students I have the honor of caring for, of the communities on whose land I reside as a settler, on the type of disenfranchisement and economic depravity we enact on surrounding communities, right?

And so, I think about when you were naming the impact of Israel's genocide, one of the things that I was thinking about, there's the student movements that are happening so powerfully and beautifully on campus that we can become attached to *and* university boards of trustees, student-affairs folks, provosts, presidents, they're making decisions about whether and how to make sense of this moment in really meaningful ways that actually are violent and problematic. And figuring out what our responsibility is not only within the bounds of our classroom communities that we tend to, less so now, but we tend to have some autonomy about what we teach within the bounds of our classes or within our advising groups. But really thinking beyond that and, like, how can *I* impact broader systemic priorities, decisions that can have a real impact not only materially for folks but ideologically about, like, who we are, or *really*, who we are *not*, right, in the face of ongoing violence.

And so, there's a lot that I'm contending with in thinking about the type of professor that I want to be, but also the type of teacher that my ancestors would be proud of.

Rosemary Perez: Aireale, so much of what you said resonates with me, particularly the piece of what does it *mean* to accept that we are part of the machine. You know, we are complicit as we try to strive and create new things, that that is a *hard* thing to hold.

It's interesting, like, in recent years when people have asked me, 'What is the purpose of your work?' I was in a meeting once with a whole bunch of faculty from other disciplines and fields, and you can't use too much jargon. I said, 'Most of my work now centers on harm reduction in graduate education.' Like, my equity-oriented work, I can't eliminate the harm that's going to happen. I know I'm still going to end up perpetuating some of it myself, but so much of the work I do now is really trying to *reduce* violence towards folks, in what is a violent process. It doesn't *have* to be, but the academy, for what it has built and what it often desires to sustain, is really violent.

And so, what does that mean in this moment? How do you create space for students who need it? What responsibility, and this is the piece that I think I have really been reckoning with, like, what is my responsibility to keep learning, because I *don't know* a lot about this. There have been other social issues that come up, and like I feel equipped, prepared to facilitate something in the moment or in class, and I, you know, I did have to very honestly tell my graduate student instructor, 'I don't know enough to fully do a classroom dialogic space.' What I will do is name and create individual opportunities, but I know we are not prepared. I don't know if we've scaffolded our own knowledge.

We have the community orientation, but I don't know if we know enough to lead this. And that's, like, a humbling thing to say. What are my limitations? Like, where am I potentially going to do more *damage* if I try to do something haphazardly, particularly in relation to sociopolitical issues?

We've got a lot of folks going with half knowledge trying to, like, facilitate stuff in classrooms or in research teams. It's making things more harmful, with the aim of creating discussion. But I do think you have to have some base knowledge. This last semester, I really had to think to myself, 'What is a good way to acknowledgeable space without potentially inflicting more harm?' I think I'm still trying to work through that. So, I think students appreciated the kind of road I took, which was like, let's hold some space, some small conversation, and then really thinking through offering individual opportunities.

I knew in the moment, because my class is on Mondays, was literally maybe a day or two after, really the violence was really coming to a head. Was I really equipped to do that? And again, I'm sitting with that. What work do I need to do to be a good steward and to be a good partner in this process. Or when do I need to advocate that I'm actually not the one to be doing this. And I'm still kind of working through that.

I think the three of us are committed to really holding space, noticing, and are reflective enough to really sit with what is happening? Who is this affecting? What does this mean for us? What does this mean for our students and our colleagues? What I think about the chapter is you just can't pretend it's another Monday. And I think what I've realized in so much of my work as a graduate education person is that so much of the discourse around campus response is focused solely on undergraduate students that grad students who are affected, who are doing organizing, whose family is, you know, reckoning with violence, who feel fear on campus, are just straight up, like, left out of this conversation. You know, I would say graduate students are students. So how do we hold space for their needs, their pain, their own kind of feelings of conflict.

But the idea that not all of our students agree on what should be happening right now, given their identities and positionality. I am in the space where many might be trying to figure out or hold space for the multitudes. And to hold space for multiple perspectives existing does not mean to ignore the violence and oppression, doesn't mean to say, 'Oh, everything can coexist.' I don't mean to say that. But to really be conscious of what that means in the academy. What does it mean to hold space and do while you're trying to undo and contest and resist is challenging, particularly if you don't feel as knowledgeable.

As an academic, to feel like you really, really don't know some stuff is really hard! But to be transparent about that, I think for my students has been meaningful to go, 'I am trying to learn more so I can be in better conversation and support with you and alongside those who are organizing,' instead of just saying, like, I have a Ph.D. I know lots of stuff, like, listen to me is honestly where some folks are going with this! And sometimes we need to know when to step up and step back, and that it is a movement back and forth.

Heather McCambly: And I think a common thread across what you both are sharing, a common thread that brings up for *me*, and maybe it's something that's been on my mind, is the way that resistance and transformation and specific to thinking about, you know, how we are standing up and speaking up and showing up for Palestinian life and for resistance. There's an element for me of

tapping into a type of *courage*, that it feels very optional once we've achieved the status that all three of us have now achieved. And it's something I grapple with if I feel afraid when I don't fully understand something. And so does that mean that I remain silent? I feel afraid about making statements in particular public ways because who might come for me because that is a very real thing right now. And so that's just something I've been sitting with is when is standing up, when is *learning* an act of courage in a way that it almost sounds trite, but, man, that's been hitting me *hard*, right is what am I willing to risk and speak and *do* in my work? And that means, like, how I show up for my students, what I write, what I represent in a public space. And that it also takes courage to admit the ways that we are complicit because of where we're positioned and the status that we've achieved. And so, for me, that's worth saying out loud in public spaces, which is, I've been having to continually tap into my courage to not hide from many things, including this.

Aireale J. Rodgers: Yes, that resonates with me so much.

Rosie, you talked about how being an academic, we're supposed to be knowledgeable, right? We have all of these conceptions about what we need to know, what we're supposed to know, but I think the same is true, of course, for teachers within the context of the classroom and normative power relations. It would be deeply uncomfortable for an educator to show up and *not* feel like they're the expert in whatever topic that they're talking about, and we're all contending with this.

It's important to figure out when we get that feeling, like, where does that come from? Actually, do I need to be the expert here, in this moment, to talk about this? I'm thinking about what might open up if you have the type of caring classroom community – that's not always possible despite all of the good efforts that we, as pedagogues, might put into it. Like, it's a reciprocal relationship, or it could be a reciprocal relationship. Just because we create the conditions doesn't mean that students will be open to engaging with us in the ways that we hope. If they do, I imagine it could be really pedagogical and impactful for students to witness us, the experts – quote, unquote experts – struggling through *with them* alongside them to make meaning in really impactful ways of what's happening in the world.

I've been listening to a lot of Marxist and Maoist podcasts lately. I've been trying to get on this dialectical materialism joozh, but one of the things that I have been really struck by in Mao's work is this discussion of antagonistic relations versus non-antagonistic relations, and the idea that we should be going within the context of non-antagonistic relationships. So, the people who we may not agree with, but principally, we're trying to move in the same direction, right, we have a similar vision of the future. We have shared ideas about the possible worlds that we're trying to create. The idea that we're moving with unity struggle unity.

I think about when I was reading and listening to folks talk about that model, I was trying to think about, like, are some of the pedagogical implications *and* pedagogical moves that I might then be able to take up within the context of the learning environments that I have the privilege of facilitating to say, like, 'Okay, we're coming at this from this perspective of unity.' There's some stuff we need to struggle through. We need to fight. And we have a safe space to fight. And we are going to come out on the other side the same way we came in.

And so, thinking about how we facilitate that for our students, but also how we allow our students to witness *us* doing that alongside them. That was something that I was thinking about as you were

talking, Rosie. Like, that would have been really dope for me to experience as a graduate student, and I'm wrestling with how I might provide those opportunities for students I might be working with.

Rosemary Perez: In my traditional classroom, the class I was teaching the seminar, I wrestled some but not as much publicly based on the kind of community, and it was students from all over the university. It was a little bit of a hodgepodge class. But I definitely wrestled very publicly with my grad students, like, my research team, because I think there's a different sense of trust and just being honest about, like, y'all, you know, we're creating some space and *I am in it* and what does it mean to be transparent in that wrestling?

Again, if I think about the work I was trying to do, what does it mean to try to be in alignment, right? Like, if you want to be in alignment that wrestling is sometimes public as well as private. And so, that was my own choices around selectively deciding who sees images of that based on my own trust as a woman of color, right, about when you get to see that, but really just kind of holding space, to be honest with students about here is where I am *in it*, trying to work in alignment with my commitments. And here is where it is going. okay, and here's where I'm stuck. I'm in it. Just, it's not even stuck. I'm in it. I'm in it with you. We are in it. What does this mean to be in it together?

I know I've talked a lot about class. We talked about classroom space, but I think a lot of my, you know, as a graduate education person, like, *a lot*, so much of our teaching and learning is in research team. And I've been very vulnerable with students in various classes also, but I feel like around this particular setting, where I just felt really out of sorts and in a different way than if it was more willing to being vulnerable and continue to be with my research team, knowing that we have some similar commitments. So, what does it mean to wrestle collectively, or what does this mean for how we continue to want to work in our team for the classes that you want to teach or are teaching? You know, maybe that's something for us to also sit with and think through for those of us interested in graduate education. How and where are we thinking about where teaching and learning happens because the people moved really directly to classes. And what does it mean, like, *all of* the teaching and learning networking, *all* of the teaching. What happens in these discretionary spaces of advising in your research team where you're not doing a public evaluation? Somebody's going to send a satisfaction survey. But some of the most powerful lessons, both positive, negative, and somewhere in between are in those spaces, those advising and team-based spaces that don't always feel very team-based and collective and sometimes can be really rich and wonderful.

Heather McCambly: So, I'm just holding so much gratitude to you both for bringing so much to this conversation. If this was one of the podcasts where we showed our faces, folks would see I've been beaming on and off, just learning from you both.

I just want to thank you for engaging in this conversation, and I'm going to briefly invite a fourth person to our panel from my wall. When you mentioned Toni Morrison speaking to you from the candle that you could see, Aireale, I noticed Angela Davis over here saying, "You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time." And I think the complexity that we've captured in this conversation, even just within this last bit, speaks to that complexity of doing it all the time. Your point about the struggle of it and the complexity of it and the different spaces is a reminder that doing it all the time means moving and shifting and learning in ways that are really tough, and I think really worth it.

Thank you both for joining me and hopefully you'll do it again sometime. And to the folks listening to us, thanks for listening to this episode of OCCRL's Democracy's College. Please look out for the next episode related to this volume, *Critiques for Transformation*. The book is now available from Information Age Press or your preferred book vendor right now. We'll be talking next with Dr. Erin Doran, of Iowa State University, about the role of ethnic studies in community colleges and the current possibilities we might engage in with that, given the anti-woke siege of postsecondary learning.

Thank you.