Differentiating Modernity (the System of White Supremacy) and Generating Otherwise Worlds as Publicly Engaged Scholars: What’s Ontological Inquiry Got to Do With It?

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Differentiating Modernity (the System of White Supremacy) and Generating Otherwise Worlds as Publicly Engaged Scholars: What’s Ontological Inquiry Got to Do With It?

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Abstract: Seeking an answer to Tina Turner’s refrain, “What’s Love Got to Do with It?” this article is a rebellious, messy, place-based and deeply collaborative conversation. We draw upon the legacy of theatre and social critique and adopt the literary present tense to evoke a brave intimate space for imagining possibilities beyond the academic conventions of the present epistemological order. We seek to illuminate how ontological inquiry may provoke powerful access to generating new worldmaking for climate justice, particularly when one is being a publicly engaged scholar. Why new worldmaking? Within this unprecedented time of racial reckoning, war, climate catastrophe and the impacts of a worldwide pandemic, all the result of human beings thingifying one another and our planet, there is growing awareness that if our relatively recent collective inheritance (infection) of the System of White Supremacy remains unabated, human life will cease to exist on this planet. How do we make a new world? First, we must discover for ourselves how we have been infected, how this infection is inadvertently spread within our universities, and how this infection prevents us from authentically loving our human and non-human companions and the planet that gives us life.

Keywords: Ontological inquiry, modernity, system of white supremacy, publicly engaged scholarship, climate justice

Introduction

The lie. He cut into the wire as if cutting away at the lie inside himself. The liars had fooled everyone, white people and Indians alike; as long as people believed the lies, they would never be able to see what had been done to them or what they were doing to each other.

--Leslie Marmon Silko,1 Ceremony

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1 As Anthony James Obst observes, Silko tells stories that set worlds in motion as the protagonist Tayo finds himself living in Achille Mbembe’s “death worlds” of “necropolitics” (40), what Ward Churchill and Winona LaDuke refer to as “radioactive colonialism” (51) and “begins to disentangle the epistemic and ontological threads that had kept him tied up in the colonial world of Western Man” (80). Sylvia Wynter names these threads the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom that originates in the mythology of the Renaissance Virtruvian Man. Her radical epistemic disobedience urges collective inquiry toward inventing the Human, after Man (2003).
The highest ethical and educational aim...is to be a light unto oneself...Without ontological search, education becomes random, rudderless, and joins the procession of vanities that is a hallmark of bankrupt cultures.
--Kaustuv Roy, Education and the Ontological Question

If the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at the moment.
--Adrienne Rich, Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations

Going against the grain of the status quo to implement ontological inquiry or publicly engaged scholarship into the colonial university is not for the faint hearted. Imagine your university has a new visionary chancellor who is a fierce advocate for publicly engaged scholarship. She invites the campus into deep collaboration on a new strategic plan that provokes us to break down entrenched silos across the campus and with the local community. A professor in the Department of Urban Education, you collaborate with a colleague, an assistant professor in the Business School, to write an internal grant proposal to create a course that will utilize ontological inquiry to equip students to be effective publicly engaged scholars. Your proposal is not funded; yet the chancellor meets with you, encourages your project and provides some funding. You begin teaching the course the next semester and a few weeks into it are removed as the professors of record because of a student complaint. Instead of being given an opportunity to explain the course pedagogy, why student confusion is common during the first few weeks of the course, and how you are handling the complaint, you are told by a campus administrator that “Our Rutgers Honors students are not ready for this level of inquiry.” Please stay tuned for the “rest of this story”!

An Invitation to Generate Otherwise Worlds

Welcome to our collaborative exploration of ontological inquiry and access to generating otherwise worlds for climate justice as publicly engaged scholars. Here we seek to differentiate and dismantle the lie of modernity: the system white supremacy that is embedded in the disciplines, policies, and procedures of the colonial university.


3 See the work of The Pachamama Alliance at https://pachamama.org/. Also see Topa and Narváez, 2022.

4 Frantz Fanon writes that within the colonial context “what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what race one belongs to” (5). Black Elk refers to this subjectivity as the Wasichus, the Europeans “who did not care for each other the way our people did before the nation’s hoop was broken. They would take everything from each other if they could...they had forgotten that the earth was their mother” (Neihardt, 217). For Aime Cesaire it is Cartesian philosophy that brands and dehumanizes the colonizer and the colonized as colonialism = thingification, “the mechanization of man; the gigantic rape of everything intimate” (77), including Mother Earth. Jack Forbes names this phenomena the wetiko (cannibal) psychosis, the greatest epidemic disease of exploitation that has been spreading like a contagion for the past several thousand years. See Vincent Woodard for illumination of how slave holders fed off the bodies of slaves in acts that ranged from cannibalism to sexual modes of consumption. Sylvia Wynter names this Man 1 and II; the racialized ontology of Man in Western philosophy that has become the eugenic/
As evoked by Silko’s depiction of Tayo’s experience, this lie invented and perpetuated by the system of white supremacy includes the multiple ways university education is designed to require adoption of a valorized singular way of being human. This is exemplified by such practices as valorizing white language supremacy and denigrating race-radicalizing literacies within what Sandy Grande names “whitestream education.” As Carmen Kynard explains, students are trained to replace their full self-expression with normed writing styles and “schoolish literary speak . . . bourgeois decorum, individualism, and white affect” (11) that distort numerous ways of being and acting. As our argument develops, our intention is that you discover for yourself the multiple and ever-present manifestations of this lie.

We invite you to consider how this lie is a core component of climate catastrophe and the unfolding extinction of human life on the planet. While this exploration may occur as uncomfortable and confusing at times, especially given the way we move across discourses typically treated separately, we, too, are uncomfortable and confused by this exploration; yet by sticking with it, we discover new actions to take toward generating otherwise worlds and a different future. This is what we desire for you!

You may be wondering about what we mean by the system of white supremacy, otherwise worlds, ontological inquiry and publicly engaged scholarship. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the system of white supremacy as: (1) the belief that the white race is inherently superior to other races and that white people should have control over people of other races; (2) the social, economic, and political systems that collectively enable white people to maintain power over people of other races. As Amitav Ghosh (2016) explains, climate catastrophe is “also a crisis of culture and imagination” (xx). Without distinguishing the system of white supremacy and imagining/generating otherwise worlds for climate justice, human life on this planet will disappear.

Our use of otherwise worlds is informed by the scholarly contributions in Tiffany Lethabo King, Jenell Navarro, and Andrea Smith’s edited volume Otherwise Worlds: Against Settler Colonialism and Anti-Blackness that models “practices of reading and listening that create new possibilities for thinking of, caring for, and talking to one another” (5) and for creating decolonial love in our world. These scholars call us to take an otherwise stance to generate new relationality inclusive of Black studies, Native studies, Critical Race Theorizing, Gender and Queer studies. As J. Kameron Carter writes in his chapter, this is “Thinking with Amiri Baraka’s improvisation through Martin Heidegger’s analytic of Being and time or Being-onto-death” and requires “something on the far side of the orientations of pessimism or, for that matter, optimism” (159-...
160). Such thinking opens up “speculative possibilities of ‘otherwise worlds’ beyond the linear temporality of colonial modernity” (Caspari, p. 178).

Our reference to ontological inquiry is informed by engagement with a pedagogical project that disrupts our inherited investment in Cartesian Subjectivity (which provides us with certainty concerning what we know) and invites shifting our focus from only knowing (epistemology) to embracing the uncertainty of “being” (ontology). For us, ontological inquiry distinguishes and challenges our inherited world views and evokes access to new genres for being human. Much more about this is forthcoming.

Julie Ellison and Timothy K. Eatman define publicly engaged scholarship as “scholarly or creative activity integral to a faculty member’s academic area… that encompasses different forms of making knowledge about, for, and with diverse publics and communities. Through a coherent, purposeful sequence of activities, it contributes to the public good and yields artifacts of public and intellectual value” (6).

As explained by publicly engaged scholar, Amitav Ghosh, “All bodies of knowledge are shaped and marked by the circumstances from which they emerge” (2021, 152). Perhaps the most important element of publicly engaged scholarship is how it fosters deeply collaborative and place-based (Basso) public-facing projects with knowledge-making approaches that invite and honor the perspectives of citizens who are most closely touched by the issues scholarship seeks to address. Joining scholarship with public engagement, we illuminate how different forms of knowledge are generated by respectfully bringing together a “cast” of scholars devoted to such work. These are individuals with first-hand, as-lived experience engaging with the issues they see as urgent in the world. The key term with gestures powerfully to their research principles.

A Deeply Collaborative Conversation of Social Critique

While scholars have a long legacy of presenting papers at conferences and publishing their research in order to begin new conversations and invite response, here we deepen this practice. We draw upon the legacy of theater and social critique, and invite you to slip yourself into our multi-vocal intervals; allow yourself to be a full participant and discover with us as we explore how “we have been living intra-actively with desire within and against the traditional presentations of research and pedagogic practice in higher education” (Wyatt & Gale 3). Tina

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7 Also see Eatman et al.
8 See his powerful illumination of multiple examples of how our collective perceptions regarding climate catastrophe are distorted by the circumstances in which particular conceptions of knowledge are created and then circulated widely. One example is the “$100 million-plus per year advertising campaign financed by the energy giant BP” that utilizes the “rhetorical power [of] . . . enumeration . . . numbers, graphs, and charts” to manipulate public opinion by conjuring the notion of per capita carbon footprint by “dividing a nation’s total carbon emissions by the sum of its population” and thereby erasing the enormous institutional emissions. This enables the creation of the mythology that climate catastrophe is a matter of “individual responsibility and consumer choice” and merely a “future threat” rather than a larger historical pattern of omnicide fueled by racial capitalism, war, empire, and genocide (151-152).
10 We intend our collaborative writing (and your reading) to mirror the quality of collaboration called for when being an effective publicly engaged scholar as well as the necessary collective rhythms of non-linear thinking required to generate new genres of being human that may enable the survival of human life on this planet.
Turner’s refrain, “What’s love got to do with it?” punctuates the danger of undervaluing and even disparaging that which is precious. We assert that love has incredible power to raise our consciousness as collaborative knowledge-makers in academe to do better.

After Sylvia Wynter, we include multiple linguistic epigraphs at the start of each section to “orient the reader as . . . [the] Argument struggles to think/articulate itself outside the terms of the disciplinary discourses of our present epistemological order” (2006, 331).

We follow Jane Roland Martin’s definition of a good conversation as “Circular in form, cooperative in manner, and constructive in intent, . . . an interchange of ideas by those who see themselves . . . as human beings come together to talk and listen and learn from one another” (10), listening to each other such that we bring our lives into conversation. We choose converse, a verb of orality, to evoke this process of active participation, reciprocity, and interactive communication in place of the more common epistemological approach grounded in distanced, estranged, and impersonal observation.

Inspired by Gregory Ulmer’s inventive mystery writing project, we put our as-lived experience, popular culture, and scholarship into new relatedness on the page. We write “out here” between us and utilize the literary present tense to invoke a temporality of being-in-the-world moment by moment, the eternal present. We evoke a closeness between our words and our world as we let our radical imaginations out to play to illuminate our generation of novel ethico-onto-epistemological pedagogical openings that equip us and our students to summon those still-missing people we have not yet been able to think and to be. Ontological inquiry provides powerful access toward an otherwise world where everyone can thrive.

Our writing is an act of rebellion and exploration that requires more of you, the reader, as we invite you to join the conversation as a full participant. The value of our text lives in what you discover for yourself and the subsequent actions you take.

The Word We Are: Our Commitments

Sharing personal experiences is a hindsight sense-making exercise. It highlights what is salient for the history-tellers. The narrative becomes curated memories that bring selected voices and events from the past to life. History-telling is simultaneously a framework of thoughts and its own reflection. We celebrate creating this collective and messy sensemaking narrative that shares the

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11 With Maria Lugones, loving playfulness “involves openness to surprise, openness to being a fool, openness to self-construction or reconstruction and to construction or reconstruction of the ‘worlds’ we inhabit playfully. . . . [and is] characterized by uncertainty, lack of self-importance, absence of rules or a not taking rules as sacred, a not worrying about competence . . . or resignation to a particular construction of oneself, others, and one’s relation to them” (401). After Felix Guattari, our playfulness is closer to being artists than scientists “who are always haunted by an outmoded ideal of scientificity” (35).

12 Here doing (including ethics and relationships), being, and knowing are acknowledged as always already intertwined in the world. As Karen Barad observes: “Practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated. We don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world . . . in its differential becoming. The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse” (185). Also see Bozalek et al.; Geerts & Carstens; and Walsh et al.
intertwinings of our lives and the places where we reside, as it highlights our commitment to ontological inquiry and how it contributes to being effective publicly engaged scholars and makers of new worlds. Please sit at our campfire and join the journey that has put these pages in your hands.

Carolyne lights the fire. She invites Tim, Arturo, and Maggie to write this chapter, envisioning the synergistic energy and possibilities likely to emerge because stories beget stories. We are the cast, the performers who have come together as we have all crossed paths with Carolyne. A publicly engaged scholar and inheritor of unearned white privilege, Carolyne finds community in the neighborhood and a place to anchor her scholarly voice at Rutgers University-Newark (RU-N). Committed to decolonizing approaches to research, pedagogy and service, her publicly engaged scholarly projects\(^\text{13}\) have been enacted with community members in the Hough neighborhood of Cleveland, the Navajo and Hopi Nations, and her Newark neighborhood. Carolyne discovers ontological inquiry in 2005, a time when she is struggling to be effective as the newly hired chair of the Rutgers-Newark (RU-N) Department of Urban Education. Through coursework at Landmark Worldwide, she develops new practices for living that enhance her aliveness and passion to persist with her university work. In 2012, she took the Leadership Course with Werner Erhard and a team that included Kari Granger, Michael C. Jensen, and the then dean of the Dartmouth Medical School, Chip Souba.\(^\text{14}\) She has since delivered more than 30 courses utilizing its PowerPoint slide deck textbook to evoke ontological inquiry with students in the RU-N Business School, Honors College, Global Urban Systems Doctoral Program, Urban Teacher Education Program, and today with students from any major seeking to fulfill core liberal arts requirements. She co-led this course with medical professionals at the El Bosque Medical School in Bogota, Colombia at the request of the dean who is committed to medical care that replaces the disease model with focus upon patient well-being.

An unrelenting and intellectually curious educational sociologist and publicly engaged scholar, Tim is a Black man who loves music and knows all his students as scholars, even if they do not know themselves as scholars yet. He has been a trailblazer, assuming leadership roles of multiple professional organizations devoted to publicly engaged scholarship and co-authoring guidelines to create new institutional spaces to nurture sustainable careers for individuals devoted to community transformation through the utilization of this form of scholarship. As the Inaugural Dean of the newly created Honors Living-Learning Community (HLLC),\(^\text{15}\) Tim extends this groundbreaking work to nurture new generations of publicly engaged scholars among university students. HLLC is an innovative RU-N initiative that re-imagines notions of talent and excellence among students whose talent has long been overlooked by troubling and needlessly narrow university admission policies. Tim and Carolyne received their PhD (years apart) from the

\(^{13}\) See Burney \textit{et al.}; White, Paymella & Nuvayouma; White & Senese; White, Makris & Lizaire-Duff; White & Owens.

\(^{14}\) Upon completion of the course, Carolyne joined an international learning community of professors, Lecole, that was started by Professors Souba and Echeverria to support professors in the effective evocation of ontological inquiry.

\(^{15}\) HLLC Vision statement: Deliver equitable, intergenerational, interdisciplinary, and transformative curriculum experiences that seamlessly blend classroom and community; utilize a strength-based model in a larger movement across higher education that challenges the dominant ideologies related to merit and interrogates the structural forces and institutional practices that perpetuate them; and activate tomorrow’s thought leaders, community collaborators, and change agents through robust living-learning experiences, partnerships, community engagement, and leadership development.
University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana’s Department of Educational Policy Studies, where they worked with several of the same mentors and discovered each other as colleagues in the RU-N Department of Urban Education.

Arturo is a Hispanic faculty member who loves learning and honors the unique experiences that each of his students has lived prior to entering his classroom. A professor in the RU-N Business School, he looks out his office window and sees his home and Newark, his living laboratory for publicly engaged scholarship. Upon his arrival at the university in 2009, he intentionally built a collaborative bridge between the city of Newark and the Business School. As a critical scholar, for Arturo, the success of a business is not found in its profit maximization, but rather in the value that it contributes to the residents’ quality of life. Arturo has followed this business-to-serve-community approach with his socio-economic development projects for the City of Buenos Aires, Argentina (food security), Federal Reserve New York City (Community Redevelopment Act - Investing in Our communities - Resource Guidebook), Macau Foundation (Analysis on China’s Belt and Road Initiative impact on Macau), and New Jersey Office of the Governor GLACO\(^\text{16}\) Initiative, to name a few. Arturo and Carolyne met as neighbors in Newark’s Historic James Street Commons neighborhood. They have collaborated on writing papers, giving conference presentations, and obtaining funding from the RU-N chancellor’s office to create a course that invites students to discover publicly engaged scholarship and ontological inquiry.

Maggie is a passionate lifelong “professional” activist who travels the world, engaging people to be leaders of change in their communities and organizations. Maggie took Werner Erhard’s workshop \textit{est} (Erhard Training Seminar), in 1975 and for the past 40+ years has worked to generate new possibilities through ontological inquiry with numerous entities that include national programs dedicated to youth education, multinational companies, and the United Nations Development Programme in Northern and Southern Nigeria and the municipality of Mumbai, India to generate a decolonizing grass-roots response to the HIV-Aids pandemic within their communities. Maggie has witnessed intimately the exigencies of institutionalized racism in America through interracial marriage and as the white mother of a bi-racial son. Maggie and Carolyne met and discovered their mutual affinity for publicly engaged scholarship when taking the Leadership Course at UCLA in 2018. Scheduled to be a guest speaker in one of Carolyne’s classes when the pandemic began, Maggie generously volunteered to teach with Carolyne, handling Zoom and other issues, discovering together how to engage students with ontological inquiry in a remote synchronous environment.

Our Urban Context, a Place of Possibilities

Our context is the RU-N campus located in Newark, the third oldest city in the United States. Often thought to be dangerous and “gritty” Newark inspires our scholarship.

To provide a hint of the radical spaces of possibility opening within our campus focus upon authentic partnerships and publicly engaged scholarship with the city of Newark, here we

\(^{16}\) GLACO, the Latin American Consular Group (Grupo Latino Americano Consular) is a formal coalition among Latin American Consulates from fourteen different countries working together to advance solutions to issues of immigration, health, and education for the Latin American community in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.
share words spoken to open the RU-N Annual 2021 Marion Thompson Wright lecture: “One Begins Again: Organizing & the Historical Imagination.”

Issuing welcoming comments to the more than 940 attendees (including 300 K-12 teachers), Mayor Ras Baraka urges us to

> find a place to make your ideology grow, so that your theory becomes practice, your labor, your love in this community every single day” [as we organize] “for something else . . . for what we want to see . . . embrace the world and move the world forward.

As if playing in a jazz ensemble, Chancellor Nancy Cantor continues the refrain with acknowledgment of how myths that surround us can

> make it hard for our historical imagination to take off and become untethered in ways that bolster our well-being” [and she invites us to join her in taking heart in the work of scholars who] “set the record straight to free our imaginations for reparative action.

Rutgers President Jonathan Holloway enters this ensemble and names the myths Nancy Cantor references

> white supremacist activities or ideologies that tell us that other people do not belong” [and invites us to join him in loving this country with its complicated ways and to embrace organizing as] “an act of love and an act of belief in the possibilities of a country that if it lived up to its ideals would be an astonishment.

The Dean of the School of Arts & Sciences Newark, Jacqueline Mattis, localizes the theme to the work each of us do in classrooms, asking,

> How do we prepare generations of individuals to participate in the creation of a more compassionate and just set of institutions and communities [and remain vigilantly attuned to the reality that] anything that burns down the optimism of a generation, especially our youngest members, will paralyze us.

**A Participatory Theater of Inquiry**

Participatory theatre is an art form where the performers, the presenters, the cast (us), invite the audience (you), the reader to interact and engage. We open this space following the Shakespearian tradition of a direct narration and thank you for joining the conversation.

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17 Marion Thompson Wright (1902-1962) of Newark wrote her doctoral dissertation on “The Education of Negroes in New Jersey” to become the first African-American woman in the United States to earn her Ph.D. in history from Columbia University. This title is borrowed from Eddie S. Glaude, Jr.’s book *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own.*
Scene # 1: You Are Here, We Are Here

There are publicly engaged scholars all around us. Yet the intentionality in their actions is not always present.

The root of the lie we attend to is our collective inheritance of Colonial Cartesian Subjectivity: the hegemonic and singular standard for being a human being that sustains the system of white supremacy and generates climate catastrophe. The curtain opens:

Interval #1: Invoking Hospitality

Maggie: From my introduction to the campus through teaching with Carolyne, I’ve become aware that extraordinary things are happening at Rutgers. The alignment of an activist commitment to social justice between the university’s first African American president, the new African American dean of Arts & Sciences, and new African American chair of the Department of Urban Education, the strong partnership with the city, the initiative you are leading Tim, with the new emphasis upon enrolling more students from Newark at RU-N, and now institutional support for the department you and Carolyne are in, a department that has previously been practically invisible, what an exciting time for the inclusion of ontological inquiry.

Arturo: Yes, Newark has become a Learning Town. There are communities where the university is in a town, geographically located in the place yet not engaged with it. There are communities that are college towns, places that are dominated by their local college. Newark is a Learning Town, where we are living differently. The interactions between Rutgers and the city stand in contrast to all other learning institutions in the city. Here the life of inquiry gets extended into the classroom and out into the community. Here the community is also part of the classroom.

Maggie: For me, ontological inquiry is about asking questions that are worth giving your life to, large metaphysical questions about our spirit, our relationship to the universe, and what and how we will contribute.

Arturo: Not for finding answers, but the questions you spend your life living.

Maggie: Yes, and it is that access to living the questions that I am deeply invested in realizing with students. Ever since meeting Carolyne at UCLA in 2018, we’ve been sharing ideas about another ontological inquiry course I envision. I want students to be able to stay in the conversation, keep living the questions throughout their college years, not just take one or two classes. I want them to become members of a community of practice with ontological inquiry such as

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18 With Rauna Kuokkanen, we acknowledge the need for the academy to “revive an understanding of hospitality grounded on a sense of social responsibility and reciprocity, in which they are considered an integral part of a worldview rather than as burdensome . . . [where it is] inconceivable to do otherwise than carry one’s responsibilities as part of one’s being (286); hospitality grounded in mutual trust. With Gustavo Esteva, if we are “well rooted in our own places, we can be hospitable to the radical otherness of the other” and “through our hope, strength, and love, we can create the soil for growing neighborliness” (4).

19 Regarding spirit Walter Isaacson quotes Albert Einstein as follows: “The development of science and of the creative activities of the spirit . . . requires a freedom that consists in the independence of thought from the restrictions of authoritarian and social prejudices” and he notes that Einstein was committed to government and education honoring this crucial role (550).
that the questions remain alive after they graduate. I think of our chapter as braiding sweetgrass together with questions.

**Carolyne:** I love Maggie’s metaphor of sweetgrass for our endeavor here and how it also points toward the questioning practices of publicly engaged scholarship and ontological inquiry.

**Tim:** We certainly have lots of questions to braid together about the sustainability of our world, the responsibility of the university, how to prepare and support effective publicly engaged scholars, and access to new genres of Being for human beings.

How is it that we ignite ‘holy curiosity’ in students? We invite you, dear reader, to engage this chapter with the inquiries that captivate you, the questions you are living. Join us as we take a closer look at the nature of these questions that for us are worthy of our lives.

Curtain drops...

**Scene #2: Why Ontological Inquiry?**

*Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.*  --W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

All our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggle over the environment, global-warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earth resources . . . [are] differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle.

--Sylvia Wynter, *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom*

As soon as people begin to no longer be able to think things the way they have been thinking them, transformation becomes at the same time very urgent, very difficult, and entirely possible. --Michel Foucault, *The Essential Foucault*

We live life; we do not learn it. An epistemological approach to a subject leaves us knowing, while an ontological inquiry evokes Being. When we inquire into who we wound up being in an area of life, our knowledge of that area is still available to us. As an analogy, with knowledge of the COVID-19 virus we were informed that we should be careful not to transmit it to others, and yet actually being people who love fellow humans enough to be careful and intentional, who vigilantly wear masks and maintain at least six feet of physical distance—all this knowledge required that we discover the lie present in our investment in knowledge alone. To be different human beings than the ones we were prior to the pandemic, we have to discover again

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20 Our use “of holy curiosity” references the critical importance of students engaging inquiry that equips them to embrace and challenge the “sacred” ideas that have been collectively defined as the bedrock of a liberal arts education such that new ideas are generated.
and again genuine love for our fellow citizens, discover our inter-connectedness as a context that evokes new ways of being and acting in solidarity for the well-being of all as our natural self-expression.

Audre Lorde invites us to consider how “a learning process is something we can incite, literally incite, like a riot” (98) and Adrienne Rich reminds us that “all new learning looks at first like chaos” (2012, 80). Our embrace of ontological inquiry is a counterintuitive and often uncomfortable pedagogical intervention that often generates cognitive dissonance for students and disruption within academe. It literally incites new learning as it illuminates and challenges inherited conversations and dispositions. We engage practices for what Michel Foucault calls for as “a critical ontology of ourselves . . . an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which critique of what we are is at once, and at the same time, the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us [and we adopt] and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them” [and he notes that] “this philosophical attitude has to be translated into the labor of diverse inquiries” (50).

Within this pedagogy, our daily lives are laboratories for discovery. We re-search and deconstruct our lived experiences and the meanings we assign to them, as well as the identities we carefully cultivate, relate to as real and defend as who we are. We discover how our inherited meaning-making may empower and disempower our ways of being and acting in the world. We discover ourselves beyond our physical bodies, capable of being “out here” in the world as the word we give. Instead of the conceptual lives we have been thrown into, lives constructed within the hegemonic singular genre made available by Colonial Cartesian Subjectivity, we may now

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21 Rutgers President Holloway writes, “Encouraging this kind of cognitive dissonance is the most powerful tool in our arsenal when it comes to preserving the democratic ideals that are supposed to be at the beating heart of our body politic” (no page no.) Downloaded 5/17/2021 https://www.nj.com/opinion/2021/05/what-we-believe-opinion.html?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=rutgerstoday&utm_content=Campus%20Life.

22 Here we refer to Carolyne’s adoption of the Leadership Course PowerPoint slide deck textbook that was created as a form of “reverse engineered” publicly engaged scholarship by the un-credentialed scholar Werner Erhard in collaboration with performance consultant Kari L. Granger and Harvard Professor Michael C. Jensen to bring a pedagogical project from the realm of popular culture and the world of business into the university environment. Erhard initiated his contribution to this project 50 years ago with the “est” workshop. The acclaimed American philosopher Hubert L. Dreyfus took this workshop and wrote a critical assessment of its significance that compared it with the work of Martin Heidegger. He concluded that the est training “is much more than a means for psychological or social change. It deals with improving the quality of human life. . . . The training, unlike reading Being and Time, actually gives a person a glimpse of the authenticity that . . . is a step forward out of the indifference of everydayness, and makes it possible . . . to experience a way of life which has aliveness as well as content and meaning” (20). See Hyde & Kopp for illumination of this pedagogical project. Erhard, Granger and Jensen piloted the course material with students at the Simon Business School at the University of Rochester from 2004 to 2007 to develop the slide-deck textbook that is being continually revised and is utilized in courses at universities around the world and across multiple disciplines. Approximately 80 professors from Canada, Colombia, England, Ethiopia, Germany, Ghana, Guatemala, Iran, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Netherlands, Russia, South Africa, Switzerland, Thailand, Trinidad & Tobago, U.S.A., United Arab Emirates, and Vietnam have engaged in professional development to deliver this material. For more information about this pedagogical project, see Erhard et al.

23 This embrace of ontological inquiry includes focus upon integrity as workability, distinct from morality, and honors the power of language, when giving and restoring our word, consistent with Martin Heidegger’s advice that we “seek to win back intact the naming force of language and words; for words and language are not just shells into which things are packed for spoken and written intercourse. In the word, in language, things first come to be and are” (15).
choose for ourselves the meaning we assign to life and live *created* lives grounded in what we say our lives are for, what we choose to contribute to the world.\(^\text{24}\)

Interval #2: Our Shared Quest with Students

**Arturo:** I remember at the beginning of the course Carolyne and I were teaching, she said to the students, “Be present in this moment. I’m asking you to do something you have not done before. You will need to listen and not think of an answer. Be in an inquiry.” It was branded on me.

**Maggie:** Arturo, when I was in high school I lived in your hometown, Puebla, Mexico, as an exchange student. While there, a different sense of presence in the world, a sense of freedom opened an inquiry that has followed me as a question worth living. I read A.S. Neill’s book *Summerhill* and discovered the difference between ‘freedom and license’ in education. This was followed by my experience in est and exposure to ontological inquiry. The privilege to learn by discovering for myself in relation with others around me is so compelling that I haven’t stopped. Ontological inquiry is a positive contagion and I am a carrier; others become carriers too. Running programs all over the country for youth placed ‘at risk’ by the default social contract they were born into and witnessing young people discover for themselves possibilities beyond these constraints, I discovered the seeds of something that expanded my inquiry: parents, teachers, and volunteers would continually ask, “Is there a program for us and our organizations, communities, companies?” As my work expanded into these organizations and companies, participants would inevitably say, “I wish I could give this to my spouse, my friends, my kids.” They had become carriers of this positive contagion of ontological inquiry.

**Carolyne:** Being a stand for the inclusion of ontological inquiry in universities has afforded the most rewarding and the most challenging teaching encounters of my 40+ year academic career. I’ve witnessed transformation in students’ ways of being and acting that I had not imagined possible in a one semester course. I’ve also witnessed students creating complaints about the course inquiry that have resulted in my removal from three courses I was teaching, removed by administrators (in addition to the one quoted earlier) who have said the following: “You are not teaching what you have been hired to teach and you don’t know your field” (by a person in another discipline who knows little about my field); and “If a professor asked me to honor my integrity I would run for the hills.” In response, I file grievances with the Rutgers AAUP/AFT union. Those actions lead to leadership roles with the AAUP/AFT union and the Rutgers University Senate and support from loving colleagues like Maggie, Arturo and Tim is crucial. More recently administrators have said the following: “You have been mistreated by the university and that ends now. Please create a new minor for the department that includes courses focused upon ontological inquiry.” I have discovered that whatever comes my way may initially appear extremely challenging, may look like failure, the end of a possibility. It may also be a temporary breakdown that makes way for a needed breakthrough. It may disclose to me and/or

\(^{24}\) It is important to note that this pedagogical project can be appropriated by students through multiple lenses. Utilizing Rosi Braidotti’s critical posthuman lens, the project might be read as “redefining one’s sense of attachment and connection to a shared world [of] multiple ecologies of belonging, while it enacts the transformation of one’s sensorial and perceptual co-ordinates, in order to acknowledge the collective nature and out-bound direction of what we still call the self” (193, 195). Utilizing Sylvia Wynter’s lens, the project might be interpreted as access to new genres of being human.
the institution something needing repair, such as how we handle student complaints, so all parties are well served toward the greatest good.

**Tim:** It is an honor to be linked up with folks who are so tuned into similar ideas. It is exciting to be in a space to work on fostering the inclusion of ontological inquiry in university education. Exciting and critical especially at this moment in our society and given the responsibility to welcome the 2020 HLLC Cohort (80 scholars) to their collegiate experience and our campus. HLLC is a residential community, so navigating this challenging pandemic not only in terms of making good on our promise to the scholars of providing a rigorous liberal arts educational experience but also dealing effectively with challenges of life (socio-emotional; in some cases food and housing insecurity) from a distance is no small matter. The students are just so amazing. I know that you know this because you all (and I imagine many of you reading this) work with young people who have been overlooked, but they’re just absolutely brilliant. Speaking here is the 2020 HLLC graduation speaker:

As a DACA\(^25\) student, you grow up in, like, you have to tailor your dreams. It’s something I’ve been fighting with all my life, whether it’s because of the lack of opportunity, lack of exposure, or the worst one of all, lack of money. I came here to become a physician assistant. I never wanted to be a doctor, that was too big of a dream for me . . . I took an Introduction to Computer Science course and within the first few weeks I knew I wanted to go into tech because I felt like I was unlocking this part of my brain that I’ve never unlocked before. Coming from a predominantly Hispanic area, no one ever mentioned coding to me.

She explains wanting to change her major and being afraid of falling behind, not graduating with her peers and wondered if she was dreaming too big.

> If Dean Santana and the HLLC environment hadn’t encouraged me to dream, I would have just probably ignored it.

She invites her peers to dream big and to

> ...be proud of those obstacles that you choose to go through because before you know it, you are going to surpass them and it’s going to feel so good.

How can we be human if we are not challenging each other to dream, to imagine? This is why you can see my blood is up around this project. When I see these stories of young people that are taking us seriously, know they are valuable, that their humanity matters, I gotta keep going on.

**Carolyne:** Your words resonate with the call to the creative imagination issued by Aime Cesaire, W.E.B. DuBois, Frantz Fanon, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Sylvia Wynter and so many scholars of color who are most keenly aware of the urgent need to reimagine what it means to be human, as well as to reframe what it means to create and share knowledge, to witness with our fellow human beings; the clarion call of publicly engaged scholarship.\(^26\) Our shared quest, that

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\(^{25}\) DACA stands for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival, a U.S. immigration policy that allows some individuals brought to the country illegally as children to receive a renewable two-year period of deferred action from deportation and enables eligibility for a U.S. work permit.

\(^{26}\) DuBois explained his transition to publicly engaged scholarship to address racism as follows: “My long-term remedy was Truth: carefully gathered scientific proof . . . I [did not] understand how little human action is based on reason” (228). He shifted to writing a pageant, short stories, poetry, *The Brownies Book, The Crisis Magazine*, and co-founded the National Association for Colored People as he helped shape the modern civil rights movement.
transformation as a human being discovers they can go after their dreams and make them happen within circumstances that may initially appear impossible. And, the importance of support. So many of our students (and we professors) have been taught that we have to do everything by ourselves as “rugged individuals” and not ask for help. Utilizing ontological inquiry, students discover what we call ontological constraints, ways of being and acting—like doing everything on our own—that limit our effectiveness.

A few years ago before the start of classes, a student, Lawrence Bell, calls to tell me that he is registered for my course, that it will be his last semester prior to graduation, and that he was recently released from 30 years in prison for a crime he did not commit. Lawrence inspires us as he models what’s possible when a human being chooses to be cause-in-the-matter of their life (no matter the circumstances), and live into a new future that they create.

With Sylvia Wynter, our pedagogical project evokes new modes of being human grounded in her concept “science of the word” that “illuminates a genre of being human that rethinks the racial underpinnings of who and what we are by overturning a knowledge system—evolution and its economic-coloniality, accumulation-by-dispossession—that justifies racism and other practices of violence” (McKittrick et al. 867).

Next, we look more deeply at the limitations of the colonial university that Sylvia Wynter calls us to overturn and how that overturning may be empowered with active engagement with ontological inquiry and publicly engaged scholarship.

Curtain drops...

Scene #3: Limitations of the Colonial University

A student asked, “Can Essential Nature be destroyed?”

Coyote said, “Yes, it can.”

The student asked, “How can Essential Nature be destroyed?”

Coyote said, “With an eraser.” --Robert Aitken, Coyotes Journal

His words scratched through the morass of banal rationalizations of political complicity and unveiled a world governed by norms of the living dead—a world of people who ‘see’ as Soren Kierkegaard once observed, and still do not see.

--Lewis R. Gordon, What Fanon Said

No one can any longer separate knowledge from power, reason from performativity, metaphysics from technical mastery . . . certain members of the university

27 See https://scheerpost.co/2020/06/29/chris-hedges-my-student-comes-home/.

28 Being cause-in-the-matter is one of the four foundational factors of the Being a Leader course. It has nothing to do with cause and effect or blame. Instead, it provides participants with access to a new context within which powerful ways of being and acting are evoked.

29 Our first course reading highlights how for some people a traumatic crucible event invites deep inquiry into their worldview and leads to a transformation into being powerful leaders. Our course promises access to such a transformation without the trauma of a crucible event. During each class session Lawrence demonstrates his choice to embrace this kind of transformation and be the amazing human being we are honored to learn with, a powerful leader with a fierce commitment to make a positive contribution to the world.
can play a part there (in pockets within the university campus), irritating the insides of the teaching body like parasites.

--Jacques Derrida, “Mochlos or the Conflict of the Faculties”

The typical university curriculum offers descriptions, concepts, and theories. Few courses include a focus upon students gaining access to being who or what we profess to offer them. University graduates confront an uncertain world where their specialized knowledge and technical skills may already be obsolete upon entry to the job market. This is a “wicked problem” (Rittel & Webber) that has “innumerable causes, is tough to describe, and doesn't have a right answer” (Camillus 1). As Harry Boyte writes, “Today, across the political spectrum, Americans feel powerless to navigate the changes and challenges of our time” (1).

Despite its noble aims, higher education often fails to provide effective responses to this wicked problem. Following her Presidency of Wellesley, Diana Walsh notes: “I am sure that we are providing our students a great education, I’m equally sure that we are letting them down in important ways—not feeding their yearning to be living the biggest ontological and existential questions they see unfolding around them and don’t know quite how to embrace, attending chiefly to their minds when their hearts (and ours) are being broken by events in the world” (10).

In his scathing manifesto, Excellent Sheep, former Yale professor William Deresiewicz argues that universities have forgotten our responsibility to help students identify their purpose in the world” (287). At issue is that our standard university coursework is grounded in an epistemological approach that over-values informative learning, and consequently grants minimal attention to ontological inquiry, which questions our taken-for-granted investment in Cartesian Subjectivity and invites ongoing exploration into what it means to be a human being. Informative knowing assumes that we prepare students by, as Martin Heidegger explains, “pouring knowledge into the unprepared soul as if it were some container held out empty and waiting,” real education, he continues, “lays hold of the soul itself and transforms it in its entirety.” For education to transform the “soul” or what we might think of as the “human being,” he advises that it must lead us “to the place of our essential being and accustom us to it (1998, 167).” “Essential being” is not what we are as a thing, but as a possibility (a no-thing).

As explained by Ronald Barnett (2011), “For two thousand years or more, we were in the presence of the metaphysical university . . . [where] a full encounter with knowledge was felt to open up new forms of human being” (11). Yet, over time our ideas about the university have become “hopelessly impoverished” and one’s essential being has been considered unrelated to valid learning (see Kopp). He invites us to “dare to imagine a new kind of university” (154), to consider if a version of the “metaphysical university” might be helpful today.

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30 Another wicked problem, Climate Catastrophe, is illuminated by Naomi Klein as “Our economy is at war with many forms of life on earth, including human life. What the climate needs to avoid collapse is a contraction in humanity’s use of resources; what our economic model demands to avoid collapse is unfettered expansion. Only one of these sets of rules can be changed, and it’s not the laws of nature” (xx).

31 Barnett (2011) notes that “The earliest form of the university (albeit one that lasted for some seven hundred years, from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries), promised to give—through diligent inquiry and learning—access to God, to an immediate encounter with extra-worldly forms of understanding or to active participation in the unfolding of a universal Spirit. Now, in its place, we have the practical university, the performative university and the pragmatic university” (19).
And that is only part of the wickedness of the problem we face. The current racial reckoning in the United States, coupled with non-stop war and global climate catastrophe, reveal how our educational system fails to educate students about the history of coloniality and falls far short of equipping us to relate to fellow humans with love and to care for the planet that gives us life.

Interval #3: Fostering Love

Tim: You cannot have love without spirit.

Carolyne: Your use of spirit reminds me of how challenging it is to talk about Being.

Arturo: Love and spirit are very strong words and echo something close to my heart. When I was writing the dedication to my dissertation, two words I directed to Maria [his spouse]: propinquity and serendipity. Here it makes me think of this chance that we work together. Because we work on the same goals, we have the chance to meet and to create the spaces that we want to inhabit.

Maggie: Your references to spirit and love inspire me. In my work, I find that wicked problems cannot be addressed if I pretend to “know how it is” or “what to do.” I must engage with hospitality, in the Arabic tradition, and see the face of God in another and listen authentically to the concerns of all of the relevant parties. It is a radical act. Chilean biologists, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela make the claim that we humans survive by loving and their explanation for love is legitimizing the other, granting their view as being as valid as my own.

Tim: That’s powerful! I am reminded of an email from a former student, now professor, who I worked with when I led the national consortium Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life. He reflected on teaching classes like Loving World Literature and yet increasingly finding the university “is no place for humanity.” When people really tell you how they’re feeling, that’s how they feel. No place for humanity, really?!

Carolyne: This brings me back to the infusion of Cartesian Subjectivity in universities. Without the balance of ontological inquiry, focus upon Being, universities become spaces that perpetuate being righteous about what we know at the expense of being related, at the expense of love. I recall an encounter with a former student I’ll call Ramon. It’s the last class of the semester for our course that utilizes ontological inquiry. Ramon asks to speak to the class. He has rarely

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32 Instead of equipping students with “what’s so” about the history of our nation, we disempower them to make sense of the world they inhabit as explained by Winona LaDuke in a 2012 Facebook posting: “euro-americans in the United States can’t talk about Gaza, because we can’t talk about Israel. Because we can’t talk about the fact that the world is not suffering from an Israeli/Palestinian conflict, but that the world is suffering from the fact that Europe has never been able to deal with its ‘Jewish Question’ without some sort of intense barbarity and horror from the Inquisition to the Holocaust. And that Europe, in particular ‘Great’ Britain, the masters of divide and conquer ‘solved’ the problem by supporting the radical, terrorist, extremist Zionists and their mad plan to resettle the ‘homeland.’ We can’t talk about Israel because we can’t talk about Wounded Knee. Because we can’t talk about Sand Creek or Carlisle ‘Boarding School.’ Because we can’t talk about forced sterilization or smallpox blankets or Kit Carson and his scorched earth policy in the Southwest. Because we have Andrew Jackson on our twenty dollar bill. Because we are one huge settlement on stolen land. We can’t talk about Israel because we are Israel.”

33 Maturana and Varela write that “This act is called love, or, if we prefer a milder expression, the acceptance of the other person beside us in our daily living” (246).

34 The Imagining America consortium brings together scholars, artists, designers, humanists, and organizers to imagine, study, and enact a more just and liberatory ‘America’ and world.
spoken all semester, despite my frequent prodding that some students object to as “calling him out.” He moves to sit next to me and begins reading a letter that narrates his journey to discover in his life the distinctions of our course engagement with ontological inquiry. He tells us that his mother died when he was 10 years old and he decided that sharing himself with others was not safe. He says that for the first time since her death, he cried last night. He thanks us for standing with him throughout the semester. His freedom to be present with us, his freedom to be fully self-expressed, opens inside loving communal inquiry that enables him--all of us--to let go of fear, be present with each other and embrace our shared humanity. As we discover our ontological constraints, like being unable to grieve, unable to trust people, unable to speak in a class—and gain access to creating new contexts for what we encounter in life, new ways of being and acting emerge. Ramon is able to grieve and tell us about his grief instead of stealing himself from his feelings and stealing himself from his fellow human beings. Imagine the contribution he can now be for the world!

**Tim:** I recall years ago being at a prestigious university and encountering people there who couldn’t even say good morning to you. I had to choose. Am I going to get seduced and caught up in that? Or, am I going to be myself - a scholar who celebrates serendipity and propinquity, Arturo. I don’t want any more students telling me that the university is not a place for humanity.

**Carolyne:** Witnessing the absence of love and humanity in our world in newly stark ways as I read the work of Sylvia Wynter and Kathryn Yusoff, I watch Jordan Peele’s 2017 film Get Out alone in my condo during the pandemic. Transported beyond conceptual, epistemological understanding to ontological discovery, new questions surface about the trauma inflicted on and carried in the bodies of human beings in what Christina Sharpe refers to as living in the wake, living in the afterlife of slavery. This legacy of thingification, of extracting and exploiting human beings, of turning people into things, is also the source of global climate catastrophe as we extract and exploit the planet’s resources to fuel the “modern dream of progress and profit.”

After nine years of engaging ontological inquiry with the rich cultural diversity of RU-N students, I rethink my typical announcement that these courses are about an inquiry into new Being for human beings. I now SEE that announcement as erasing how our shared inheritance of Cartesian Subjectivity in cahoots with coloniality constructs indigenous people, African Americans, women, all othered groups (actually most of the world population) as less than fully human. With strategic revisions the course material could be made less color-blind, and could serve to facilitate differentiating the system of white supremacy rather than inadvertently letting it go undistinguished and unchallenged. Otherwise, I risk students not having the experience of being fully seen, of their professor not acknowledging the face of God in them. Without acknowledging this horrific legacy of thingification that turns people into things for extraction and exploitation, turns the planet into a thing for extraction and exploitation, and generates global climate catastr

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35 As Sharpe explains, “In the wake, the semiotics of the slave ship continue from the forced movements of the enslaved to the forced movements of the migrant and the refugee, to the regulation of Black people in North American streets and neighborhoods, to those ongoing crossings of and drownings in the Mediterranean Sea, to the brutal colonial reimaginings of the slave ship and the ark; to the reappearances of the slave ship in everyday life in the form of the prison, the camp, and the school” (21).

36 See Pachamama Alliance free course Climate Action Now: https://landing.pachamama.org/climate-action-now?_ga=2.3808632.931465230.1702678458-1883273406.1702678458
catastrophe, I risk failing my commitment to prepare students for powerful leadership in our fractured and wounded world.

Let us look more closely at the hidden depth of this complexity that we ALL live in - students, professors and readers alike.

Curtain drops...

Scene # 4: Attempts to Erase the Sacred Hoop - Exclusion, Exploitation, Extraction

My heart is in the water / My heart is in Mother Earth / My heart is in the strong winds / My heart is in all my relations.

--Desirae Harp, *Fly 50, Season Z, Solarize*

But everywhere is the ultimate act of treason. That so few can be aware that their nation’s heart is bleeding.

--Bad Religion, *Age of Unreason*

Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge. . . science affords a view of the world, but a summary and superficial view. . . scientific knowledge enumerates, measures, classifies and kills. . . To acquire the impersonality of scientific knowledge, mankind *depersonalized* and *deindividualised* itself. . . An impoverished knowledge, I submit, for at its inception-- whatever other wealth it may have--there stands an impoverished humanity.

--Aime Cesaire, “Poetry and Knowledge”

We write on stolen land from which Indigenous Tribes in New Jersey, New York, and Colorado were forcibly removed. This land carries the stories of these peoples, of their struggles for survival and identity, and of their resilience and wisdom. Consider the stolen land you may occupy (if living in a country whose indigenous people were forced to vacate) and join us as we acknowledge our enculturation into Settler Colonialism and the deadly consequences of that enculturation. Settler colonialism is about the land and in the alienation of land from life, alienable rights are produced: the right to own (property), the right to law (protection through legitimated violence), the right to govern (supremacist sovereignty), the right to have rights (humanity). In a word, what is produced is whiteness. Moreover, it is not just human beings who are refigured in the schism. Land and nonhumans become alienable properties, a move that first alienates land from its own sovereign life. Thus we can speak of the various technologies required to create and maintain these separations, these

37 See Navarro’s exploration of how this Native hip-hop song employs “theoretical promiscuity” as it voices opposition to “structural and environmental racism, poverty, and oppression in the United States” while developing a “Native feminist land ethic which privileges living with the land rather than over the land . . . [and] builds alliance with, rather than isolation from, Black communities” (101, 102).

38 Lyrics from the song “Age of Unreason” released May 3, 2019, written by Gurewitz/Graffin, for the punk rock band Bad Religion. In addition to being a founding member of this band while in high school, Greg Graffin has a PhD and teaches courses in evolution at UCLA and Cornell; a publicly engaged scholar.

39 Here our use of Settler Colonialism marks how the embrace of Cartesian Subjectivity legitimated the mythology of a hierarchical Chain of Being that placed Indigenous and Black people on the bottom rungs and how that mythology legitimated Settler Colonialism in the United States.
alienations: Black from Indigenous, human from nonhuman, land from life. (paper 4)

Always already inheritors of this dominant ideology (that includes Cartesian Subjectivity and Settler Colonialism within the system of white supremacy) as it is infused throughout all levels of education, we are taught to strive to be the singular and valorized version of rational, autonomous, individuals. We sever our “minds” from our hearts and bodies, sever our connection to Mother Earth, become righteous in our exceptionalism, and occur to ourselves as the center (masters) of the universe. This mythology infuses collective amnesia about its creation and the inhumane legacy of parsing most humans on the planet as less than whole and complete human beings, mere objects made available for extraction and exploitation and then utilizing their bodies for habitat destruction, climate catastrophe, slavery, genocide, such that even social movements designed to recognize them as fully human, i.e., gaining the right to own land, the right to vote, the right to be educated, the right to clean water and sustainable food, comes with the implicit requirement that they assimilate into the valorized singular model of Humanism.\(^\text{40}\)

While this ideology has been soundly critiqued by a wide spectrum of scholars–indigenous and feminist, scholars of color, postmodern, poststructural, and critical posthuman theorists–global neoliberalism continues to generate a new reality of \textit{individualism on steroids} for a world where the “winner-take-all ethos is unfettered by any remnant of social contract and undisturbed by any ghost of the labor movement, where the rich can walk like gods in the nightmare gardens of their deepest and most secret desires . . . [where the] the return of a robber baron-era topography of economic inequality” (Davis & Monk ix) leaves in its wake an infectious collective affective mood of apathy, cynicism, and resignation.

Michelle Fine portrays the impact of global neoliberalism within educational environments as follows: “well-funded, corporate reform strategy that seeks to disrupt public school systems and universities, with its eye explicitly on unraveling the influence of teachers’ unions, widening the reach of corporate dollars and influence, narrowing and conservatizing the curriculum, reducing reliance on ‘brick and mortar’ schools or full-time (much less tenure track) faculty, and imploding what constitutes ‘public’ . . .” (79).\(^\text{41}\) Today we witness new conservatizing encroachments into both K-12 and university curriculums with the orchestrated movement to galvanize resistance to Critical Race Theory, the banning of books and the banning of even critical conversations about all forms of oppression that people encounter, and seeks to enforce a white-washed, candy-coated (false) version of America’s history that denies its continuing violent legacy.\(^\text{42}\)

\(^{40}\) A contemporary example of this legacy is found in the routine use of the acronym NHI (no human involved) by public officials of the Los Angeles judicial system to “refer to any case involving a breach of the rights of young, jobless, black males living in the inner city ghetto” (Wynter 1994, 13). For powerful illumination of the legacy of thingification of people and the planet, see Kathryn Yussoff’s exploration of the entanglement of racism and climate change.

\(^{41}\) Interestingly, the Rutgers AAUP-AFT union has been extraordinarily effective within the past few years. After threatening our first ever strike at Rutgers, we achieved an historic contract in 2020 that provides for pay equity across the three Rutgers campuses and in the pandemic crisis we developed a coalition of 19 Rutgers unions and achieved agreement among 91% of faculty for a people-centered work sharing alternative to layoffs of the most vulnerable workers.

\(^{42}\) https://www.npr.org/2021/06/20/1008449181/understanding-the-republican-opposition-to-critical-race-theory.
In what follows, we use a broad brush to paint the current political-economic reality of our country, the United States, that has inspired democratic possibilities around the globe, yet is failing our democratic experiment at home. We point to the urgency of “what’s so” in our country today and in the process do not deny or intend to erase the incredibly innovative and life-sustaining projects at work to disrupt this injustice.

In service to greed, we have seen our federal government make corporations privileged citizens, vilify science and educators, decimate education and health care systems, empower a school to prison pipeline, rape Mother Earth’s resources, and fail to protect citizens in the most fundamental ways—as evidenced most recently in the Supreme Court’s decision to deny women the right to control their bodies—and all most glaringly apparent for people of color. Among all developed nations, the United States leads in income inequality, poverty rate, minimal focus upon child well-being, low social mobility, high healthcare costs, high infant mortality rate, high obesity rate, high antidepressant use, short life expectancy at birth, high carbon emissions, gender inequality, high military spending, most arms sales, highest incarceration rate, worst murder rate. Millions of American citizens lose employer-based medical insurance during the pandemic. On lock-down in our homes, the engine of predatory disaster capitalism pauses and a momentary clarity emerges. Absent the “tranquilized obviousness” of normalized routine and plugged into social media, we witness the videotaped public murder of George Floyd.

During this time, a president actively generates chaos and foments racism, death, and insurrection, with claims to make America great again (presumably when white privilege reigned unabated), that climate catastrophe is a hoax, that the coronavirus is disappearing even as the rates of infection and death escalate exponentially, and that the recent presidential election was stolen with no evidence and numerous courts refusing to align with his “big lie.” As we write this chapter, television stations disseminate his unprecedented incitement of domestic terrorism against the capitol and he becomes the first American president to be impeached twice.

With American imperialist aggression at home on display, peaceful and respectful protest and rebellion erupt, people take to the streets, raise their voices in grief and outrage, as global uprising answers the historic invitation issued by pandemics for humans to “break with the past and imagine their world anew” (A. Roy 13). We learn that the former police officer who weaponized his knee, leveraging the full weight of his body on George Floyd’s neck for 7 minutes 46 seconds, including 1 minute and 53 seconds after he stopped breathing, is found guilty of all three charges brought against him. Far from justice, this is a critical first step toward imagining a new world, a step that we argue would have been highly unlikely without the courageous action

43 We distinguish predatory disaster capitalism, where a few benefit at the expense of the majority and the planet is harmed, from other active movements, such as conscious capitalism, that seek to create the practice and perception of business as a force for good in the world. See Fisher and Klein.

44 NBC news reports a 150% increase in Anti-Asian hate crimes from 2019 to 2020 according to police department statistics and these are only the crimes that are reported. Karthick Ramakrishnan, founder and director of demographic data and policy research nonprofit AAPI Data, acknowledged that while this uptick cannot be entirely attributed to “the Trump administration’s incendiary, racist rhetoric about coronavirus,” he believes the rhetoric “did play a part in fostering hate” (Yam 2).

45 The rest of her quote is: “We can choose to walk through it [this portal], dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it” (A. Roy 13).
of a teenager, Darnella Frazier, who chose to be *cause in the matter* of justice by videotaping the horrific behavior of the police.

While for some readers, our argument here may occur as a position that attacks a commonly shared point of view; yet, our intention is not to attack. It is to invite alternative perspectives that may initially incite cognitive dissonance and its accompanying discomfort. Cognitive dissonance is often experienced when we discover something we “didn’t know that we didn’t know.” As Maxine Greene advises, “To seek alternative ways of being . . . to find such openings is to discover new possibilities—often new ways of achieving freedom in the world” (2).

**Interval #4: Ontological Inquiry Is Disruptive**

*Carolyne:* If we look, we may discover that our everyday way of being is chiefly tranquilized obviousness, going through the motions from one thing to the next while being minimally present. This is why being led to our essential being is so disruptive to our everyday ways of being. We have discovered that to become accustomed to disruption requires a foundation built upon practices such as integrity (workability generated from being whole and complete as a person by doing what we say we will do and when we are unable to, honoring our word by saying by when we will do it), authenticity (telling on ourselves when we have been inauthentic), being given being and action by something bigger than how we wound up being, and being cause in the matter of everything in our lives (not because we in fact caused it, but as a powerful place to stand and act in our lives).[^46]

*Arturo:* Publicly engaged scholarship is also incredibly unsettling and disruptive to our everyday ways of being as academics and to the university tenure and promotion policies and practices that privilege other forms of scholarship. These radical ways are risky and often posed as deviances. They do not conform with traditional tenure and promotion rules, and when one’s curriculum vitae is assessed, their worth may not always be apparent or valued.[^47]

We are in this complex world together. Dear reader, are you discovering aspects of your lived experience in this inquiry? Have you encountered the discomfort, even the resignation of “that’s just the way it is?” Do you benefit from unearned privileges, unseen entitlements? Where are you taking risks in your work toward new worldmaking?

Curtain drops...

**Scene # 5: Being Effective Publicly Engaged Scholars**

*[The American philosopher John Dewey] warned that a “class of experts removed from common interests becomes a class with private interests and private knowledge, which in social matters is not knowledge at all.” Experts should imagine...*[^46]

[^46]: For more about these terms, please see Erhard, Jensen, Granger (2012).

[^47]: For recent evidence of the risk and disruption of publicly engaged scholarship and how this risk is exacerbated by systemic racism and political interference designed to undermine the exercise of academic freedom see https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2021/3/4/cornel-west-tenure-clash/ https://journalism.columbia.edu/statement-nikole-hannah-jones-tenure-decision?fbclid=IwAR1Ms8rdaaTY7RfksEtL Y2i75A3tmCjfL-MC8WKnAOjVVCvSkeIqP1ankY
themselves like the skilled shoemaker who realizes that it is “the man who wears the shoe [that] knows best . . . where it pinches.”

--Jeanne Oakes & John Rogers, Learning Power

We need to deconstruct and reconstruct . . . who we are and how we do our work, moving . . . to spaces that welcome diversity, energetic dialogue, and two-way streets of collaboration . . . with others in creating a world where everyone can win.

--Nancy Cantor, “The Academy as a Zone of Neutrality: Not True and Not Good”

Neighborhood is not a geographic term. It is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man’s dignity and integrity.

--Rabbi Jachim Prinz, The Most Tragic Problem is Silence

As Nancy Cantor says, to be effective publicly engaged scholars we must deconstruct and reconstruct who we are as scholars, move beyond the privileged class of experts in the ivory tower to become neighbors who invoke hospitality and work in collaboration with members of our neighborhood. This is not a simple process for those of us who have been taught in an out-of-balanced way to see independent work and our expertise as “the best or right” expertise. How do we set aside what we think we already know and learn to “bracket” the always-already-listening of our discipline that may inadvertently devalue the expertise of community experts? How do we develop authentic listening skills that enable entering the “world” of those most nearly touched, those who “know where the shoe pinches,” not as though we are hearing their version of things, but rather from inside the validity of their experience? This is how ontological inquiry becomes crucial for equipping us to reconstruct ourselves such that we can work effectively in authentic partnerships.

A publicly engaged scholar does not conceptualize a project alone. S/he generates it collaboratively with community members. At times incredibly challenging and at other times incredibly joyful and satisfying, this innovative form of scholarship requires new modes of being and acting for researchers whose expertise and education have been socially privileged such that their accustomed ways of being and their methods may need to be reworked to be effective.

A Rutgers doctoral student, Alezandrea Melendrez, utilized publicly engaged scholarship and youth participatory action research with system-involved cis and trans young women, trans young men and gender non-conforming people to engage in local political advocacy to support the permanent shutdown of San Francisco’s Juvenile Justice Center. She cites Barbara Smith’s words to illuminate the deeply engaged nature of her dissertation: “What I really feel is radical is

48 As observed by Fiumara, “One can ‘study’ philosophy with relative ease but it is more difficult to experiment in listening. It is almost as though in order to listen one had to ‘become’ different, since it is not so much a question of grasping concepts or propositions as of attempting an experience. Unless we are ready, receptive - and also, possibly, vulnerable- the experience of listening appears to be impossible. Philosophy demands our entire mind and listening requires our totality” (italics in the original). Experiential participation does not seem that necessary in seizing a theoretical construct. Possible responses to significant questions are lucidly articulated and when they are sufficiently satisfying they are accepted without any personal transformation being implied. Conversely, the more one listens the more one is absorbed by an awareness of the fragility of our doctrines and of the fertility of a Socratic ‘wonder’ (191).
trying to make coalitions with people who are different from you . . . dealing with race and sex and sexual identity all at one time“ (233). Melendrez adds,

This collaborative inquiry necessitates the erasure of I, my research project, my dissertation, into a collective subjectivity of We, a racially diverse coalition of community-based scholars. Our research project emerged out of a five-year partnership through the YWFC . . . We built long-lasting relationships . . . rooted in trust and vulnerability, secured funding, collected 100 interviews . . . We hope that our work adds. . . an example of what is required to carry out this kind of research. (48-49)

In practice, both ontological inquiry and effective publicly engaged scholarship require courage to go against the grain of what we have inherited regarding teaching/learning and the conduct of research. They require being a stand for a new world.

Interval #5: Being Courageous

**Carolyne:** Being courageous is what I witness as Arturo negotiates a space and place within the university system to be a publicly engaged scholar pursuing projects with the city of Newark, the work he is passionately committed to, in the face of institutional breakdowns that fall short of recognizing, supporting and rewarding his powerful work. His calm courage and consistent choosing of love when others in the same situation may have chosen anger or resentment or even left the university, inspires me to persist when I encounter breakdowns at the university. This is the new Being of human beings that I aspire to and desire for our students.

**Arturo:** To be courageous includes being courageous to oneself. It is to actively ask who you are as you move through spaces of being. It is to engage yourself as you engage with others. It is a risk to take. It is to become a value proposition to share in the classroom and in the community. It is a new way of being that is collaborative.

**Tim:** And here is where the hospitality you have been promoting Maggie is so crucial. Interacting with people in a way that we are willing to be surprised as we discover who people are moment by moment and open to them inviting us to see things that we’ve never seen before.

**Maggie:** Yes, as we braid courage, risk, and the delight of discovering others anew, moment to moment with the intriguing use of a business term “value proposition” as a declared way of being in our lives with others, doesn’t this all invoke the wonder of inquiry we are talking about? Such new ways of seeing and thinking and writing about what we’re up to with ontological inquiry and publicly engaged scholarship. We are raising questions and bringing ourselves present to what’s been growing in our conversations.

Curtain drops...

Scene # 6: An Invitation to Join Us

The radical imagination emerges out of radical practices, ways of living otherwise, of cooperating differently, that reject, strain against, or seek to escape from the capitalist, racist, patriarchal, heteronormative, colonial, imperial, militaristic, and fundamentalist forms of oppression that undergird our lives.
Max Halven and Alex Khasnabish, *The Radical Imagination: Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity*

*Without new visions, we don’t know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is . . . a process that can and must transform us.*

--Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*

*To share in a loving community and vision that magnifies our strength and banishes fear and despair, here, we find the solid ground from which justice can flow like a mighty stream. Here, we find the fire that burns away the confusion that oppression heaped upon use. . . Here, we can see what needs to be done and find the strength to do it. To value ourselves rightly. To love one another. This is to heal the heart of justice.*

--Victor Lewis, *Creation Spirituality*

We conclude in the middle of our inquiry, a fitting place for nomadic, rhizomatic researchers like us. Here we return to the epigraph that opened this chapter with Leslie Marmon Silko’s protagonist, Tayo, speaking of the lie that generated the epistemological and ontological threads that bound him to the colonial world of Western Man. Perhaps you, too, have discovered how Colonial Cartesian Subjectivity and the singular valorized genre of being a human being severely binds and constrains you--all of us--and threatens the very survival of human life on the planet. Perhaps like us, you are concerned about how we learn to love each other and honor, not simply tolerate, our differences. Imagine university classrooms inviting “thinking [that] enlarges, even invents, the competencies of all the players . . . such that the domain of ways of being and knowing dilates, expands, adds both ontological and epistemological possibilities, proposes and enacts what was not there before” and we professors “becoming responsible, owning up to the deadly practices we perhaps identify as ‘problematic’ but nonetheless position as inevitable” (Franklin-Phipps & Rath 270). As Martin Luther King, Jr. advised, “Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.” And for James Baldwin: “Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word "love" here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace - not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth” (341).

*Perhaps you’ll join us*, choose to use the unimpaired strength of language to generate new genres of being human so the world will live as one.

Through this exploration we discover what love has to do with it and to borrow from Jackie DeShannon, become even more convinced that “what the world needs now is love, sweet love, it’s the only thing that there’s just too little of . . . no, not just for some, but for everyone.”

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49 As illuminated by Clark and Parsons, rhizomatic researchers “recognize their embeddedness, allow research to lead them, accept that attempts to synthesize are never finished, listen to those before them and on the margins, and give themselves to a life of becoming” (35).

50 There is no page number here as the original source is unknown and scholars suspect this quote may be a compilation constructed from various of Dr. King’s writings.

51 From John Lennon’s song Imagine. See http://www.songlyrics.com/john-lennon/imagine-lyrics/

52 Our use of “everyone” includes all living entities, including Mother Earth. See Bruno Latour’s argument that the
Interval #6: Curtain remains open as our conversation continues…

As the curtain remains open, the dialogue continues. We ask you, gentle reader, to share the possibilities you discover when exploring the connections between ontological inquiry and being an effective publicly engaged scholar. May you be inspired as you keep this fire burning.

Coda: “What Am I Learning at Rutgers University?”

A Rutgers University Newark student tells her professor that what she is learning at our university is that if she is a strong woman who acts from her values, she will be patted on the head and shoved out the door. Here the student refers to events on our campus that begin at the start of fall semester 2023 when we receive a letter from Rutgers President Johnathan Holloway that opens with an enumeration of outstanding accomplishments of Chancellor Nancy Cantor and closes with the statement that she will be leaving the university at the end of this academic year. This is followed by a copy of a letter Newark Mayor Ras Baraka sends to President Holloway that clarifies that it is not Chancellor Nancy Cantor’s choice to leave the university and the statement that “to remove Chancellor Nancy Cantor is to take the city of Newark back two steps.” This is followed by a video message from Chancellor Nancy Cantor that underscores the mayor’s letter with the words “I had hoped we had more time to work together and I know you will continue the important work we have begun.” Several more letters from faculty, including 50 law school professors, professors in Arts & Sciences, a letter from Carolyne and Tim’s department. As has been the convention since Chancellor Nancy Cantor’s arrival, Mayor Baraka speaks at the Fall Convocation and declares loudly, “I love Nancy Cantor!” The message from our Newark community is clear, I (we) love the extraordinary leadership of this woman, her deep commitment to leveraging publicly engaged scholarship to advance racial equity and equitable growth—a commitment she persistently enacts.

September 29, 2023, the Rutgers University Senate (that includes all Rutgers campuses) put forward (89 for, 47 against) a Vote of No Confidence in the President. September 30, 2023 the Department of Urban Education hosts an Open House attended by the chancellor, the mayor, faculty, former and current students, members of the broader Newark community. We celebrate the resurgence of this department: the creation of seven new programs and addition of several new tenure-track faculty members, all possible due to the leadership of this chancellor, to our new dean, and new chair. Several murals now appear on the walls, one painted by the dean, that celebrates joy in urban education. It was in this space nearly 20 years ago that Carolyne and Ras Baraka first met. New to Newark and Rutgers, hired as the department chair, Carolyne asks Ras to teach the Social Foundations course. A former teacher, then principal, he agrees. On this day they talk about their shared commitment to keeping Nancy Cantor as the RU-N chancellor. Ras says, “You never know, things can turn around on a dime!”

On Oct. 5, 2023 when the Rutgers Board of Governors meets on our campus, students walk out of classes in protest of the plan to remove the chancellor. To date not a single clear
reason has been given for her removal. Within such a stunning void rumors emerge that “the president wants to replace her with his friend,” or “she is not a team player.” We are left to wonder if this is simply the colonial university striking back at one of its “colonies” – Newark, one of the most culturally diverse campuses in the United States--for becoming too successful under the nationally and internationally recognized moral leadership of a woman whose tangible results toward generating otherwise worldmaking is unparalleled!

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**Carolyne J. White** is a publicly engaged scholar and professor at Rutgers University Newark. Principal investigator on projects funded by the U.S. Department of Education, National Science Foundation, Joyce Foundation, Navajo Nation, etc., her scholarship is published in book chapters and journal articles in *American Indian Quarterly, Cultural Studies-Critical Methodologies, Educational Foundations, International Journal of Education Policy, Journal of Negro Education, Qualitative Inquiry, Teachers College Record, Teacher Education Quarterly*. Current focus is a pedagogical project that differentiates the System of White Supremacy and fosters Climate Justice utilizing ontological inquiry to provoke ways of being and acting beyond colonial Cartesian subjectivity.

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**Timothy K. Eatman** is professor and the inaugural dean of the Rutgers Honors Living and Learning Community. Co-editor of the *Cambridge Handbook of Service Learning and Civic Engagement*, he has published several journal articles, book chapters and reports. Faculty member for the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Summer Institutes on High Impact Practices and the Advisory Panel for the Carnegie Engagement Classification for Community Engagement, he received the 2010 Early Career Research Award for the International Association for Research on Service Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE) and he often consults with Higher Education associations and institutions.

**Margaret J. Weiss** has spent her entire career developing team-building programs and consulting with organizations, communities, and families to maximize their performance. Specializing in numerous approaches that she has found to be effective, including Ontological Design, Integral Leadership in Adaptive Situations, Somatic Awareness, Commitment-Based Management, and Appreciative Inquiry, she has designed and engaged in ontological inquiries with global corporations, government agencies, and large capital projects primarily focused on the Executive Teams leading the Cultural Change necessary for innovation and care for people and the environment.
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