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Article

Help [Not] Wanted: Neoliberal Justifications for Undermining Community Control in Alternative Teacher Certification and Global Service Learning

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Abstract

This essay compares two neoliberal education reform activities not often studied in tandem: alternative teacher certification in the US, as explored through Teach for America (TFA), and the growing international service learning (ISL) movement. Guided by the Movement for Black Lives' call for a world where those "most impacted in our communities control the laws, institutions, and policies that are meant to serve us," we will explore the ways in which programs' neoliberal justifications obscure the authority, history, and agency of the communities they purport to serve, while convincing people outside of the community that those within are benefitted. The comparisons we draw highlight the ways in which deficit orientations permeate different local and global contexts to perpetuate and normalize privatization and the wresting of control from local communities. In making this comparison, we aim to better understand what these programs have in common: a white supremacist worldview at once unstated and pervasive, which reinforces harmful ideas about what it is to respond to the purported needs and desires of others, not expressed in their own terms. This globalization of "helping" may actually increase the difficulty of those targeted by such "help" to speak in their own terms.

Keywords

alternative teacher certification, international programs, global service learning, power structure, experiential education

Introduction

This essay compares two neoliberal education reform activities not often studied in tandem: alternative teacher certification in the US, as explored through Teach for America (TFA), and the growing international service learning (ISL) movement. Guided by the Movement for Black Lives' (2017) call for a world where those “most impacted in our communities control the laws, institutions, and policies that are meant to serve us,” we explore the ways in which both of these kinds of programs use neoliberal justifications to erode and delegitimize community control by obscuring the authority, history, and agency of the communities they purport to serve, while convincing people outside of the community that those within are benefitted by this work.

Neoliberalism is a “theory of political, economic practices grounded in the belief that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey 2005:2). The role of the neoliberal State is to “create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices” (Harvey 2005:2) by promoting de-regulation, the elimination of tariffs, and a range of monetary and social policies favorable to business (Brown 2000:3). Neoliberal ideology “aggressively attempts to break the power of unions, decouple income from productivity, subordinate the needs of society to the market, reduce civic education to job training, and render public services and amenities as unconscionable luxury” (Giroux 2004:249). These values prompt the State to withdraw its financial assistance and managerial hand from social sectors like welfare, education, and health care (Harvey 2005:66).

Since its rise to prominence in the 1970s, neoliberal ideology has “served as the often invisible and supposedly objective worldview within which social, economic, and political challenges are reduced from complex conceptual issues to technical problems” that require only the “guiding hand of market forces” and individual self-interest to solve (Lahann and Reagan 2011:9). According to Harvey, this narrative has had “pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (2005:3). Neoliberal ideology, in other words, is now hegemonic.

In keeping with this ideology, teacher staffing by TFA in the global north (and, by extension, around the world through TFA’s affiliate program, Teach for All) and short-term service projects completed by university students in the Global South are both advanced by their proponents as rational solutions to the problems they aim to address: the educational “opportunity gap” in the US public education system and “underdevelopment” in the Global South, respectively. But, in casting these approaches as inherently rational and effective, and the individuals and organizations that carry them out as morally neutral, TFA and many international service learning programs diminish the complexities of the “problems” they aim to address and the communities they purport to serve. In the name of neediness and scarcity on the part of local school districts **and families**, TFA represents its corps members as benevolent benefactors, despite **inadequate** preparation and their being paid as professionals. Similarly, many university ISL programs narrate their work as “helping” or bringing development to a faraway land, which not only presumes ignorance and need on the part of local people, but also fails to

account for the relative lack of knowledge and skills possessed by the student service providers.

The comparisons we draw in this paper between TFA and these international study abroad programs aim to highlight the ways in which deficit orientations permeate different local and global contexts to perpetuate and normalize privatization and the wresting of control from local communities. In making this comparison, we aim to better understand what these programs have in common: a worldview that is best understood as white supremacist in that it is rooted in the presumption that privileged white people and their traditions of knowledge and action are naturally positioned to define and respond to the purported problems of others, not expressed in their own terms. In fact, this globalization of “helping” may actually increase the difficulty of those targeted by such “help” to speak in their own terms.

Why this paper? Why now?

The seeds of this paper, a reflective essay that seeks to integrate prior experience (Lesnick, 2017) and qualitative research (Bahn, 2014) with a comparative conceptual approach, were planted in 2012 when we traveled together to northern Ghana as teacher and student, members of an interdisciplinary course cluster that studied child development through the lenses of psychology, education, and literature. In Ghana, we engaged for one week with local community members at a village preschool and kindergarten, a non-governmental organization that had invited connection with our Education Program, and we began to explore what it means, as Lesnick writes elsewhere, to work “within, and with a consciousness of, differences in access to wealth and resources, resulting from relationships of power that encompass all” (Lesnick, 2017).

This initial visit grew into a complex engagement and summer action research fellowship, now in its fifth year, in which a group of students from two liberal arts colleges, consortial partners where Author2 teaches, joins with a group of students in Ghana. Called Lagim Tehi Tuma, this program—expressly trying not to replicate the ISL model we interrogate here and yet not entirely separate from it—engages students in introductory language learning and educational internships at the preschool/kindergarten, with a community radio station, in a computer literacy training center, and, this summer for the first time, with a cultural dance and drumming group. Taken together, these sites offer a platform on which to study and explore questions of history, identity, and culture in the context of postcolonial power relationships. LTT aims to wrestle directly with the white savior complex (Cole, 2012), with American triumphalism and exceptionalism, with voluntourism (Robertson, 2014), and with the workings and impacts of the knot of enslavement, colonialism, and racialized identities (Hartman, 2006; Pierre, 2012).

The project does this wrestling in a few ways. One is by giving time and resources to local language study in order to make it harder for students to assume that English is the only or best context for engagement. This encourages them to respect the role of language in culture and the bi- and multi-lingualism of many people they interact with in Ghana. A second is by building academic reading and discussion into the program, both in the US and in Ghana. A third is by compensating local people, with a reliable and transparent budget structure, to serve as program coordinator, language teacher, internship mentors, and guest speakers on a range of topics. A fourth is by building regular reflection sessions into the entire program so that participants meet to discuss problematic issues, experiences, and questions, supported by a committee leadership

structure shared by the Ghanaian and American students, and comprised of communications, health/safety, and budget committees to encourage voicing of hard issues. Finally, a way to keep alert to the complexity of this work is by thinking about it as, in Minh-ha's terms, "reassemlage" (1982) and thus avoiding becoming overly attached to any one form it takes or prescriptive about how it is done. In other words, remaining open to new inputs, ideas, critiques, and changes, rather than bureaucratizing the process, enables creative evolution, midcourse correction, and learning from mistakes failures, and experiences. This paper is one instance of this goal.

Two years after our first visit to Ghana, I (Hannah) found myself grappling with similar questions of power, and differential access to resources, agency, and voice, while writing my senior anthropology thesis on Teach For America. Using an in-depth content analysis of TFA's marketing materials and interviews with undergraduate students who were applying to the organization, I explored the ways in which TFA drew on neoliberal conceptions of education and citizenship—which valorized private, market-based solutions to the educational "achievement gap" in America's public schools and encouraged prospective corps members to "make a difference" and "be a force for change" all while marketing the personal benefits to TFA corps members—to set the members of its corps in opposition to "traditional" teachers and the communities they purported to serve. The narratives I uncovered in this domestic context, of benevolent benefactors "serving" grateful (though faceless) recipients, mirrored those that Alice and I witnessed (and actively sought to avoid) in our work in Ghana.

Many years later, while pursuing a master's degree in public service, I found myself once more confronting an organization that, like TFA, prescribes privatized,

technical solutions onto another community while casting its members as too needy to be anything but grateful. Because I was an educator when not in school myself, I was counseled to complete my international public service project, a requirement of my program in which students partner with a public service organization abroad and complete a project for them over the course of a two- to three-month period, with a public university semester abroad program. The program, which brings undergraduate students to Mozambique each summer to complete an interdisciplinary service project with a local poultry business, was framed by my adviser as an ideal placement for my graduate coursework: it would seamlessly align with my desire to expand my experience with facilitating international travel opportunities for students and with my graduate program's requirement that I complete a public service project in an immersive, cross-cultural environment in which I could build on my first year of classes.

The operation that the undergraduate students in this program work with is described as both a functioning business and an outreach and development project. Students are encouraged to “learn first-hand of the challenges in creating sustainable business in this inhospitable environment” (University of Arkansas, 2017: Program Overview). The university's descriptions of the program focus on the way it helps local people with nutrition and jobs, while enabling visiting US students learn how they can “lead” and “have a lasting impact.” Not found among the accounts generated by the university are the tales Author1 and I found elsewhere on the internet: that the partner organization is complicit in taking land from local farmers to support large agribusiness interests, which provides a puzzling, at best, and problematic contradiction of the

university's account of its work at worst (Mozambique National Farmers' Union and GRAIN, 2015).

I chose not to partner with this study abroad program. But the experience of learning about it reminded both Alice and me of what we'd learned from our time in and continued engagement with Ghana. The harm that is too often done under the name of "service" not only affects local actors but also obfuscates key issues. Many readers may be familiar with critiques of TFA and/or international service-learning work. However, **few** people are drawing comparisons between these two types of programs, one situated in the Global North and the other in the Global South. Our hope is that, in naming some of the parallels between the two in this paper, we can shed light on the ways in which neoliberal assumptions obscure both the key issues, themselves, and the agency and voice of the communities they purport to serve.

Who are we?

We write as two white, American women, both raised in upper middle class households by parents who had been to college and graduate school, who met when Hannah completed an undergraduate degree at the small liberal arts college where Alice teaches and directs the Education Program. We now consider ourselves colleagues, working both as educators (Hannah in a secondary and Alice a post-secondary setting) and academics—Hannah currently in graduate school, Alice a longtime faculty member.

We acknowledge the importance of situating ourselves and accept the responsibility of ongoing engagement with the unearned and destructive privileges that facilitate our lives. In calling our privilege as white, middle class, Americans/residents of

the Global North *destructive*, we mean to emphasize the active hand of privilege in a world where its workings often result from, and in, theft and exploitation (of people, land, and resources), waste and the imposition of waste products, unequal access to quality education, healthcare, housing, and other determinants of survival and thriving, cultural appropriation and erasure, and the creation of laws and policies that facilitate mass incarceration and mitigate the consequences for violence against people of color. Without ongoing work, these privileges will remain less obvious and less problematic to us (and to those like us) than they are to people (nearby and distant) on the receiving end of the destruction.

At the same time, in the work we do that informs this paper, and in the paper itself, we stretch for a wider sense of who we are and might be, where we come from and where we go. We aim to trouble the ways of knowing and not knowing that rest on and fuel white privilege and white supremacy that give rise to some of the supposed remedies we critique here. While owning the limits of our connection to communities outside of our own, we also recognize difference and nuance within and around our communities, and we affirm the complex ways communities differ but also overlap, elide, and exchange.

We read the Black Lives Matter platform's call for community control in part, and rightly, as excluding us, and as asking us, as white people, to wait; to learn to listen; to stay and to get others like us out of the way. We avoid calling ourselves white allies or comrades, not because we disavow those forms of relation, but because we feel they are not ours to name—and because we suspect that they may sometimes be reductive of the subjectivities involved. At the same time, we hear in the call of Black Lives Matter—with

its interlocking focus on direct, democratic control of law enforcement agencies at local, state, and federal levels; an end to the privatization of education; and participatory budgeting at local, state, and federal levels—a mode of critique that is also a path of transformation. We are dedicated to learning from these teachings, and to integrating these learnings into our work as educators and into our writing of this paper.

From “the Personal is Political” to “the Political is Private”

In his 1981 book *The Culture of Public Problems: Drinking-Driving and the Symbolic Order*, Joseph R. Gusfield argues that public problems are “owned” by particular groups of people who have the power to define the problem (i.e., what it is, how it is situated within society, what its underlying causes are, etc.) and thereby inform the interventions implemented in response. Gusfield writes that this concept of ownership is derived from the “recognition that in the areas of public opinion and debate all groups do not have equal power, influence, and authority to define the reality of the problem” (Gusfield, 1981: 10). Who owns a public problem and how the problem is itself defined are contested. Thus, while public problems can be made sense of in multiple ways, the public will not know of or will not consider these alternatives if the dominant group manages to control its definition effectively enough. The result: the ways in which people respond to the problem—the realm of possibilities that they view as accessible or acceptable to use in addressing it—are shaped and most often narrowed by the way that the problem is itself defined.

Today, private corporations and their political allies have gained ownership over two public problems: the educational “opportunity gap” in the United States and “underdevelopment” in the Global South. Our use of quotation marks for these terms here

and in the opening paragraph of this paper are meant to signal the constructed character of these designations as problems. Under their ownership, both have been defined as technical problems in need of private, market-based solutions. Choice, partnerships between state, corporate, and civil society actors, and “individual and corporate citizenship that emphasize autonomy of the individual and voluntarism and charity in the market” are cast as not just the ideal but the only logical solution to such problems (Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011: 547).

But these definitions obscure the political, legal, sociocultural, and structural contexts in which these “public problems” operate; in doing so, they shift the public’s gaze away from the role of the State and structural inequities perpetuated by dominant groups towards the actions of individuals (Author2, 2014; Petras, 1997; Keith, 2005). Defining these public problems—the ones that TFA and ISL programs aim to address—as issues of individual knowledge and action rather than structural change is a highly effective discourse, in that it renders knowledge of its own character and limitations hard to reach and hard to recognize as significant. This narrative privatizes knowledge of itself.

In a neoliberal world characterized by a love of measurable, quick-to-be-seen solutions, it is difficult to imagine alternative definitions of these public problems that more readily grapple with the complexity of the challenges, as the ensuing solutions would be viewed as too complex, too costly, and too risky to fund and carry out. This perceived lack of alternatives is directly a product of a powerful and pervasive discourse about underdevelopment in both domestic and international contexts. As Gee (1989) explains, a discourse works by commanding compliance with its terms; to stretch too far

from those terms threatens to render the move of critique irrelevant or crazy. Both TFA and many ISL programs draw on this dominant discourse to make sense of their work. The result: they emphasize their impacts (often couched in market terms like profitability, leadership, and growth) while failing to grapple with, let alone acknowledge, the far more complex elements of the problems they aim to address and the potential drawbacks in their approaches to these problems.

For example, many ISL programs tout the benefits of their students' work without grappling with the potential harms caused, key issues ignored, and community voices ignored in the process (Hartman, 2016). This is manifest in a quote from the public university that I (Hannah) was counseled to partner with for my international project, in which they describe the work of their students in a summer service-learning program in Mozambique: "The operation has created several hundred jobs, has purchased feed from over 40,000 individual farmers and generates affordable protein that is severely lacking in the local diet. As such, the operation is both a functioning business and an outreach and development project" (University of Arkansas, 2017: Program Overview). Here, as with TFA, the university portrays its work as "outreach" and an act of service. While not necessarily inaccurate, such an account fails to tell a more complicated story: that the university partners with a for-profit agribusiness that benefits greatly from obtaining and converting local farmers' land into large-scale sites of agricultural production from which they profit. GRAIN, which describes itself as "a small international non-profit organisation that works to support small farmers and social movements in their struggles for community-controlled and biodiversity-based food systems," provides a contrasting description of the program's work, instead arguing that the university's partner

organization's goal is to lay claim to land and extract money from the area. This alternative interpretation of the university students' and their partner organization's work, an acknowledgement of and attempt to grapple with the potential harms caused by outside-in, top-down development efforts, is absent from the program materials, as it is with too many other ISL programs.

In a clear parallel, TFA paints the students it purports to serve only in terms of their poverty, all the while emphasizing corps members' positive influence on their reading and math scores as compared to those elicited by other teachers (Bahn, 2014). But, as with many ISL programs, this narrative paints a single story (Adichie, 2009) of the organization's work, failing to grapple with the complexity of the problem—the “opportunity gap”—itself, and the mixed impacts of its corps members. For instance, while TFA writes on its website that its corps members dramatically improve student learning outcomes (Teach For America, 2017), numerous studies have found that TFA corps members only perform better in contrast to comparably undercertified teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Heilig and Jez, 2010). Like the study abroad program in Mozambique, the organization does not grapple with, let alone acknowledge, that it has laid claim to land, literally in the case of public schools now turned over to privately-funded charter chains often designed as investments by individuals and corporations (Fabricant and Fine, 2013; Ravitch, 2010), nor that it has extracted money from the public sector by shifting pay from teachers and other personnel in traditional school districts, and shifting per-pupil dollars out of public schools (Fabricant and Fine, 2013; Ravitch, 2010).

Centering Damage

To justify their approaches to the “public problems” they aim to address, which are most often top-down and technical in nature rather than engaged in complex, systemic, and justice-oriented change, both TFA and many (though not all) ISL programs paint the communities they purport to serve as needy and desperate. For example, US students who had participated in the Mozambique program described the local diet as “severely lacking,” and prospective TFA corps members assumed that their students would be different from the “average student” and eager to “escape” their local communities (Bahn, 2014). These deficit orientations are promoted to position the work of these organizations as benevolent—or at least as neutral and inevitable.

Both organizations use the urgency of need to justify the haste of providing service, and the brevity of preparation to do so: one week to, at most, a few months in the case of ISL programs, five weeks in a TFA summer training program. TFA uses this narrative of desperation to undermine the idea that it takes study, practice, mentorship, and personal growth **to** become a capable teacher. In the name of efficient service delivery, many service learning programs similarly sideline critical consciousness of the power involved in their work, and in particular in the motivations and impacts of their partner organization. In both cases, those “served” are assumed to be too needy to be anything but grateful, all while the actual impacts of the work are neither challenged nor reshaped.

In promoting deficit orientations to the communities they purport to serve, both TFA and ISL programs frame their work as both neutral and inevitable. Their master narratives do not acknowledge the complex and often contradictory nature of their approaches. This power to say what is neutral and what is not is significant, all the more

so as the work of creating and disseminating the definition itself often passes under the radar, conditioning—seemingly without contestation—what is believed to be normal, appropriate, and responsible. Keith discusses this in his analysis of the knot of globalization, privilege, and “service”:

Overvaluing one’s assets and a corresponding devaluing, often to the point of invisibility, of the assets of those without access to institutionally controlled resources comes about when institutional power allows one to define the situation, determine needs, and impute value to whatever assets (knowledge, skills, resources) parties bring to the table. What is at work here is a privileging process that is normative in both elitist and meritocratic social systems, as hegemonic assumptions accord moral superiority to the socially superior, through privilege created by class, race, gender, morality, civilization, and the like. (Keith, 2005: 15)

When one entity has the power to define the situation, needs, and appropriate approaches to such needs, the imbalance allows those at “the top”—those ascribed social superiority on the basis of privilege—not only to define their own moral superiority, but to make any opposition to or questioning of this superiority (and ensuing actions) appear misinformed at best, and ridiculous at worst. This, in turn, inhibits debate over how the public problem has been defined in the first place. For example, when Author1 protested the prominent access given to TFA to recruit students on her two campuses, she was told by the career centers that the colleges had to remain neutral. Similarly, Author2’s adviser encouraged her to turn her gaze towards the points of “seamless integration” between her own interests, that of her university’s, and the ISL program, rather than question the potential harms and points of contradiction in the public university's program.

The lack of conflict in these contexts, broadly speaking, may “hide the very features of the structure which make for their absence, which prevent the opposite forms of consciousness from being observed... Acceptance of factual reality often hides the

conflicts and alternative potentialities possible. Ignoring the multiplicity of realities hides the political choice that has taken place” (Gusfield, 1981: 13).

Rethinking Reciprocity

Many international service learning and alternative teacher certification programs, such as Teach For America, exemplify neoliberal ideas of individual autonomy and responsibility, while at the same time allying themselves to notions of collective global citizenship, solidarity, development, and activism (Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011). In these ways, such programs market themselves as social justice-oriented organizations, while continuing to fall back on an actual philosophy of volunteering-as-citizenship that teaches young people to “‘do good’ in the world as it is, rather than recreate the world as it could be” (Hartman, 2016: paragraph 14).

This tension between individualism and solidarity is best exemplified in the notion of reciprocity, a common concept in ISL circles today, whereby Global North ISL participants complete service projects in exchange for the personal learning and growth that they receive through their travels to and interactions with individuals in a faraway land. While both TFA and ISL programs market their impact on *other* communities, the reciprocity framework was born from the recognition that international service learning programs often benefit the student participants far more than the communities they purport to serve. The premise of reciprocity, then, is that if each party benefits in equal, though different, ways, the relationship is ethical. But this move towards reciprocity, while seemingly better than a charity or savior-mentality approach to such partnerships, is still deeply rooted in neoliberal ideas of individualism and personal responsibility. It

fails to fully grasp and grapple with the complexities of such work, as a result. Moreover, it still misses the key question: Who gets to define the terms of the exchange?

The discourse of reciprocity, like the broader narratives spun by TFA and ISL programs, casts both groups' work as neat, tidy, and **positive**. ISL student participants and TFA corps members serve their target population and benefit (often with a line on their resume) in return. But the framework of reciprocity perpetuates capitalist mindsets of always needing more. It is rooted in a giving-receiving dichotomy: "Reciprocity and its related concepts remain rooted in a (market) accumulation process, which presses people into giving and receiving and ultimately creating social networks as a way of *having more*" (Keith, 2005: 15)—including more knowledge. Reciprocity, as currently conceived, falls short because it only addresses one part of our selves: the rational, instrumental, and calculable part, when in fact such partnerships actually require a much deeper form of interconnectedness and interdependence (Keith, 2005). The relationships are rooted in neoliberal frameworks of exchange, rather than solidarity.

Indeed, the origin of the term "reciprocity" is in relations among states or nations, not simply individuals or self-constituting groups: "the relation or policy in commercial dealings between countries by which corresponding advantages or privileges are granted by each country to the citizens of the other" (Dictionary.com, n.d.). Here, too, the operation of structural, political relationships is easily submerged by the individualism of neoliberalism, and as Petras (1997) has argued, this has guided policy support for NGOs in order to keep focus away from political struggle. At this time, notions of reciprocity are still defined by those in the dominant group. They get to define the terms of

engagement and to set the narrative for how this engagement is presented to the outside world.

Just Speak Nearby

In the words of anthropologist and filmmaker Trinh T. Min-ha (1983), “Scarcely 20 years were enough to make two billion people define themselves as underdeveloped. . . First, create need; then ‘help.’”

Since 2013, Alice has worked with Alhassan Sumaila, the Coordinator of LTT, to build a local leadership and mentorship team in Ghana, and the two US colleges that support the program have committed to a budget to compensate individuals for this work, as well as to fund beginning instruction in Dagbani, the local language. Colleagues at the University of Development Studies nominate four students to join the program each summer. As a summer internship with an NGO or agency is a graduation requirement for UDS students, this experience counts towards their degree, is overseen by their professor, and culminates in a written research report they each prepare.

One summer, at the start of my visit, I (Alice), I was met at the airport in Tamale by colleagues, together with a young man I didn't know, one of the summer Fellows from UDS. Following his work in the school, he had slept over in the community the night before, and came to greet me. As I joined him in the back seat of the taxi, he introduced himself, and then asked, “So Prof, how is Ghana's development coming on?” I am not expert in what he meant by development, nor do I subscribe to its reality. But the last thing I wanted was to treat the student to a pompous lecture about my terms of engagement, or to discourage or insult him in any way; I did not want to refuse to answer

a frankly posed question. I can't remember what I said, but I remember wanting it to be respectful, hopeful, and very brief.

More recently, I (Alice) found myself similarly challenged in a meeting with another student who attends the institution where I teach. She had just accepted a position to work as a TFA corps member after graduation. She had asked to meet with me because she remembered our discussion of some problems with TFA in the education course she took with me, but not what the problems were. She didn't ask me what the problems are; she didn't actually seem to have anything to talk about with me, and I was not sure what to say. She had taken the position, so I congratulated her. I said I would send her an interesting article that a teacher in Philadelphia gave one of my classes to read, about the dispossession of public schools and disinvestment in their communities, but even as I said I would, I knew I wouldn't. Why did I set up a proxy for my own voice, and why did I feel so constrained in saying what I thought? Sure, I am a "professor" of education, but I am also middle-aged and employed full-time by a private college with a large endowment. My student, a young woman of color, is starting her career, her livelihood, and knows enough to know that in taking the position she might have kept it from someone less aware of issues of racism and elitism. I ended up feeling mostly sorry that this sad encounter had wasted nearly an hour in an already packed day and week. It was the dream of an engagement, but not one.

Speaking, also, as a foreigner in a West African country—in this case, as a Vietnamese academic and filmmaker employed by an American university and working in Senegal—Minh-ha (1982) challenges the traditional approach of the ethnographer: "I do not intend to speak about. Just speak nearby." Minh-ha's 40-minute film

“Reassemblage,” from which these words repeatedly come, is an exemplar of a line of work that disrupts the knowing that legitimates the neoliberal justifications of power that we have been tracking. To speak *about* a group of people, we put a border around them, and refer to them with others, outside of themselves, as the audience. To “speak about” is one way of knowing and tracks, like every way of knowing, from a way of living (Palmer, 1987). TFA speaks *about* the students it purports to serve by citing data about them “in an almost fast food-like fashion” (Veltri, 2010: 185), capitalizing on their demographics to attract funds, corps members, and public support. Many public universities similarly otherize the community they claim to serve in their marketing materials to students, in which the schools sells traveling to one of the world’s “most poverty-stricken regions” to help a community “facing extreme conditions” (University of Arkansas, 2017: Videos).

To speak *nearby*, in contrast, is a way of proximity, susceptibility, and possible accountability—subject to some of the same conditions, accessible to some of the same situations. I (Author2) sat nearby the student in the taxi, on a road in Northern Ghana, wanting to speak that way, but he invited me to speak *about* his country from the vantage point of a foreigner—American, white, a professor with enough money to arrive on a plane. What does it mean to speak nearby when all these categories of privilege are taken into account? So privileged, can one even be said to come “nearby?” Here, we circle back to what it means to write this way and do this work as white American academics/educators in a structural context of white supremacy understood as foundational to civil society in the US and in other postcolonial settings (Coates, 2015). For us to respect the call for community control by the Black Lives Matter platform

means we must ask these questions perennially, rather than adopt a specific set of answers and then insist on them everywhere we go. On a program level, to respect the call for community control similarly requires that programs such as those we describe here be organized to support questioning, critique, and multiple stories. They must be alert to the relentless rationalism of neoliberal approaches, nested as it is in systems of structural oppression hostile to community control.

When speaking or designing programs nearby, we have the possibility to channel what Eve Tuck describes as a desire-based framework. As she writes, desire-based frameworks are “concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (Tuck, 2009: 416). Tuck frames this desiring-to-know as an alternative to the damage-centered frameworks commonly employed by researchers and organizations like TFA and many ISL programs, as we’ve explored in this paper. Desire-based frameworks assume the importance of unlearning and not knowing, together with what Tuck calls regard for the “not anymore” and the “not yet” (Tuck, 2009: 417). In this, there is something to learn from proximity, but it may not be what is expected and it may not correspond to assumptions about problems or progress. With this acknowledgement of not knowing, Tuck’s framework aligns with Min-ha’s notion of *speaking nearby* because it suggests a way of speaking that grows out of the complexity and liveliness of experience, not the formulations that support speaking *about* others.

Perhaps, too, there is something in this notion of *nearby*—of putting seemingly separate things nearby one another—that is a possible method for disrupting the neoliberal discourses of leadership we sketch out here. In this paper, we put Teach For America nearby the global service learning movement and, in doing so, seek to tease out

some of the intricacies and complexities of the work of each. Putting them nearby one another helps make aspects of each more visible. As we wrote earlier, so much of the work we see today is striving for clarity and directness, so much so that the nature of the work can be hidden from view. Powerful discourses can privatize knowledge of themselves, rendering them impossible to see clearly. Putting disparate programs, thoughts, and actions nearby one another can help shift this.

In writing this paper, we started (and in some ways have remained) in a position of opposition to the programs about which we've written. Our own experiences and positionings caused us to confront TFA's and many ISL programs' narratives of themselves with an alternative, **conception** of their work. We met their touted success with evidence of their harm. We opposed their technical conceptions of the "problems" they sought to address with our own understandings of the topics at hand, which were embedded in complex structures and systems but did not necessarily make space for any parts or pieces of their definitions. We spoke *about*, not nearby. And in stories of our experiences that we shared, when we found ourselves nearby—Author1 with her former student accepting a job with TFA, Author2 with her academic adviser recommending the problematic ISL program—we did not speak out. But, in this current political climate, we were humbled by feedback on a draft of the paper from a colleague of Author1's, someone who called into question our insistence on the truth of our arguments. We'd met one narrative, one single story (Adichie, 2009), she said, with another, rather than expanding space for more altogether. She called us to move away from our own truths towards a place of complexity, competing truths, and contradictions.

And we are inclined to listen to her, with one qualification.

In thinking through the process of comparing disparate programs and what our take-away can be beyond fighting to replace one set of assumptions with another, and in writing from the positions of privilege we hold, we want to suggest the importance of assigning different weights to different truths such that those upheld by people oppressed rather than privileged by a system weigh more.

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