

# Subversive Acts of Revision: Writing and Justice

*Teaching for peace and justice means offering students bold opportunities to revise hate and discrimination. Bruce discusses vibrant examples of subversive revision and implores teachers to build them into their curricula.*

**A**s my career wanes into its twilight years almost 40 years after I began to teach, I find myself radically and insistently focused on the capacity and audacity of teaching English so that people stop hurting and killing each other.<sup>1</sup> No other business seems significant during such dangerous times in public education.

The intellectual and social-emotional nature of teachers' work is being compromised, corrupted, and corroded by management pedagogies let loose on schools. These have brought a range of toxic and disfiguring educational "reforms." Federally unified standards (CCSS), high-stakes testing regimes, centralized curriculum guidelines, teaching scripts, canned corporate curriculum touting "best practices," delivery targets and performance indicators, outcomes assessments, benchmarks, competencies, accountability measures, merit pay based on students' test performances. All these so-called efficiency campaigns have led to a cumulative evisceration, demoralization, and marginalization of teaching as an honorable profession.

And not only teachers are suffering. Recently, Claire, a high school student in my town, spoke to an audience of 200 gathered in support of activities of the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI).<sup>2</sup> Claire began her speech, "I am not a number. I am not a test score. I am not a percentile ranking or a grade point average. But that is the *only* way my school sees me." She bemoaned that students in her school are full of pain at being so recognized; they brutalize each other with acts of bullying, vindictiveness, and unkindness because

they feel powerless to direct their anger and frustrations elsewhere.

Of course they do.

As Parker Palmer asserts in his new book, *Healing and the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*: "Violence is what happens when we don't know what else to do with our suffering" (qtd. in Von Stammwitz 5). Such stubborn focus on grades, test scores, and percentile rankings is life-sucking and does immeasurable violence to students.

What might it take to humanize schools so that they become more hospitable to the lives, interests, backgrounds, and aspirations of young people, especially those from challenging contexts? What might it take to put relationships at the center of everything we do in schools? What might it take for teachers as professionals to challenge the status quo with reasonable alternatives?

First, we must stop obedience to and silence in the face of oppressive and unjust systems let loose upon our schools, our teaching, and our students. Second, we must claim English education for social justice.<sup>3</sup>

## Claiming English Education for Social Justice

Social justice is about power: who has it, who makes the key decisions that affect our teaching lives and our students' learning lives. Social justice is a democratic project that promotes inclusiveness and fairness. It is about understanding access to literacy as a civil right.

Sonia Nieto describes three components of social justice: First is to provide students with the resources they need to learn to their full potential. This means access to quality curricular materials and pedagogical resources that hold a belief in all

students' ability and worth, high expectations and rigorous demands, and teacherly/administrative discourse and action that confronts deficit notions about students and the communities from which they hail. The second component urges teachers to draw on the resources, talents, strengths, and "funds of knowledge" (González, Moll, and Amanti) that students bring to their education to create relevancy in the curriculum—in other words, students need to see their experiences in what and how we teach. The third component

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of social justice requires that teachers create a healthy learning environment that promotes critical thinking and agency for social change—that views both students and teachers as actors in struggles for justice (see Bomer and Bomer; Christensen; Early; Monseau).

English education for social justice helps us to keep in mind that the role of public schools is to teach *all* students, not just those from privileged backgrounds, to think and participate in our country's future. It helps us realize that our job as English teachers is to help students develop a repertoire of literacy strategies for increasing their abilities to comprehend, interpret, and produce texts of their own not just for improving test scores.

Best practices for literacy instruction and learning—real reading and real writing for real audiences and real purposes, not just school-sponsored and often inauthentic activities for artificial audiences and purposes—appreciate a more humane vision of education that values agency, rigor, civic responsibility, authenticity, and democracy. Best practices for literacy learning entail seeing literacy as a social practice that involves ways in which people actually use and create texts for culturally meaningful purposes within culturally meaningful

activities. They recognize that language and literacy are tied closely to the cultural foundations of a society and, as such, that what counts as literacy is associated with the historical, social, and political values of a community with attention paid to equity and to civic engagement in a democracy. Best practices for literacy learning challenge the assumptions that inform high-stakes tests and pre-packaged literacy and writing programs that so many have been forced to use.

Teaching English for social justice entails questioning structural inequalities that disadvantage students based on race, ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, and other differences and challenging accepted notions of success based on merit, ambition, talent, and intelligence. It calls out for us to set more equitable educational agendas and create literacy experiences that support diversity, equity, and social justice for *all* the students in our classrooms. Teaching English for social justice means blurring the line between teaching and activism, and making ethical decisions that enable us to provide opportunities that we know in our hearts and minds our students deserve even when it means *not* doing what school administrators are pressuring us to do, such as endless test-prep. As Herbert R. Kohl argues, "Risk taking is at the heart of teaching well. That means that teachers will have to not-learn ways of loyalty to the system and to speak out" (32). Teaching English for social justice means claiming our creativity and imagination on behalf of our teaching lives and students' learning lives while insisting that our work *is* fostering the reason we went into teaching in the first place—to contribute to society and to help others.

## Subversive Acts of Revision

Teaching English for change and justice necessarily involves subversive action during demoralizing times. Good teaching is subversive because, among other things, it challenges students to think, to question things as they are, to envision and consider alternative possibilities. Subversive teaching engages students in learning through active arts of inquiry rather than passive travails of transmission. To be "subversive," we must encourage students to think beyond the conventional wisdom of the status quo and popular culture (Postman and Wein-

gartner). We can practice subversion in teaching English through the imaginative arts of revision.

Revision in writing (and in life) results from a process of re-seeing. Revision is part of a process of clarifying how we express ourselves and not “a sign of failure” (Early 84). It is a process of re-imagining, an ability to see otherwise. At the heart of revision is the act of looking for other possibilities and ways of envisioning. Revision is blind-sided when we disallow possibilities beyond common understandings. Revision reframes and reveals alternatives. Revision disarms and dissects. Revision expands our awareness and enlarges our perceptions. As Mary Ehrenworth and Vicki Vinton assert, “Revision is the opportunity to restructure, reword, play, plan and imagine it differently” (19). Authentic revision leads to new ways of seeing, new insights, new inventions and developments. Revision lies at the center of reform; it rings particularly on a fervent desire for change. Revision, in this vein, leads to transformation.

To speak of writing and justice through subversive acts of revision, though, is to imagine large. Stakes are so high, and we are so small; sometimes we seem incapable of it. How *do* we teach writing so that people stop hurting and killing each other? How might we stop the little daily murders that reduce our teaching lives and our students’ learning lives to misery, violence, and frustration? What might we learn if we were to explore our relationships with privilege, disproportionate poverty, intractable racism, sexism and homophobia, and their ongoing violences and take responsibility for democracy? How might we explore our national values that celebrate equality and respect for diversity in ways that allow us to achieve realization of these ideals? How might we transform hate, fear, injustice, and violence into empathy for others and respect for social justice? How can we turn apathy and despondence into hope and action?

Revision as it pertains to learning about others makes our eyes see differently; we begin to look farther, to look beyond the self and one way of knowing and believing, to accept other ways of knowing and being. Revision pushes us to look at the same words, images, sounds, texts, people, animals, landscapes and see something completely different. When we study with profound concentration, we are able to see more intently and pause

to light-step into wider understanding. Learning to re-see, to re-vise, in the deepest sense of the word, becomes exciting with possibilities when we begin to view the world through others’ eyes and to hear others’ voices. Our awareness of potential expands exponentially when we discover alternative ways of seeing, viewing, and interacting with the world through exposure to multiple perspectives, diverse cultural traditions, and unique individual narratives. Subversive acts of radical revision can stimulate civic dialogue and move us closer to achieving inclusive pluralistic values intrinsic to democracy.

Once such bold acts of re-imagining occur, the acts of revision are fairly straightforward. We look at what we’ve written and do some math—we add, we subtract, we substitute, we rearrange (Gallagher). To demonstrate, I examine artifacts that serve as exemplars of subversive acts of revision; my purpose is to enlarge understanding of the possible and to illustrate how engaging subversive projects of revision such as these with our students might lead to transformation.

The Common Core State Standards include attention to close, critical reading of and writing in informative and persuasive genres; research into historical and contemporary issues of concern in students’ communities might reveal numerous possible texts such as the following, which students can closely read, critique, and subversively revise. These examples can be used as models to inspire students to revise locally relevant texts that seem oppressive, hateful, or demeaning to members of their groups and communities, such as zero-tolerance policies in school that result in punishments that lack common sense or statistical analyses of tracking programs that effectively promote race- and class-based segregation (see Kozol).

## Examples of Subversive Projects of Revision

### Speaking Volumes: Transforming Hate

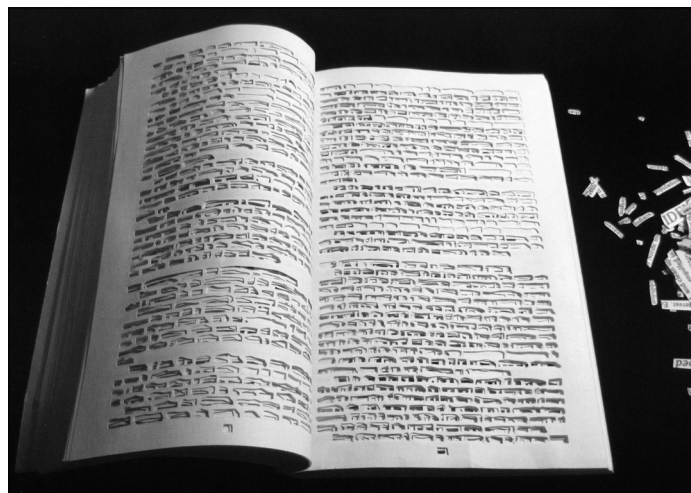
In 2008, the Holter Museum of Art in Helena, Montana, sent out a call to artists to revise and transform hate through art. The Montana Human Rights Network had acquired a stash of white supremacist organizing materials from a group operating in western Montana; the Network sought the help of Holter Museum to put the material to some

good use. Thinking that “the world as we know it would be transformed if we had the insight, skills, and motivation to turn negative expressions into positive influences” (Knight 7), artists who participated in the resulting exhibit, “Speaking Volumes, Transforming Hate,” embraced the challenge. Some collaborated with their students, colleagues, and family members to turn violent pages into drawing paper, folded peace cranes and to wash the pages clean (Knight 7). By responding creatively to hate, injustice, and violence, artists encourage awareness and transform hate and violence into empathy for others and respect for social justice.

Included in the stash of materials acquired by the Montana Human Rights Network were more than 4,000 copies of Ben Klassen’s *The White Man’s Bible*, which argues for white supremacy with abandon. He refers to people of color as “mud races” and spends more than 400 pages in the book arguing against equal rights and for removal of “the alien mud races from our midst . . . . They must be expelled just as the human body expels germs, bacteria, virus and foreign bodies from amongst its own cells” (159). In revisionist response, artist Martha Gerlarden filmed a series of digital video stills that depict her erasing pages of the offending text. Gerlarden’s acts of subtraction from pages of *The White Man’s Bible* purge the pages clean of discrimination, intolerance, racism, and bridge the boundaries between hate and compassion, ugliness and beauty. The artist revises hatred by erasing it with a \$1.99 bottle of correction fluid.

Ariana Boussard-Reifel, an artist of Lebanese descent, has experienced the discrimination advocated in Klassen’s books on her skin. In her work *Between the Lines*, she carves away offending words in the text with a utility knife, individually removing every bit of ink from the page. Her revision by subtraction (see fig. 1) completely transforms race hatred, xenophobia, sexist diatribes, and homophobia into “hundreds of pages of delicate lace work. The discarded words, reduced to a meaningless pile, are themselves conceptually powerful” (Tremblay 25). She helps us see how we might revise and transform hate creating a world where people live together in light, beauty, peace, and harmony. Her work creates a welcoming relational container that holds the possibility of ongoing dialogue. She gives

FIGURE 1. *Between the Lines*, 2006–07, by Ariana Boussard-Reifel. Photo courtesy of the Holter Museum.



the viewer hope that a kinder world is possible through revision.

Artist Lisa Jarrett mines the pages of *The White Man’s Bible* to create “found” poetry. She excavates pages of hate and reframes words as poems. She makes changes in spacing, lines, and arrangement, washes over offending text, and highlights words in ways that impart new meaning. The resulting poem revises in profound and systemic ways; hers is an exultation of creativity, a transformation that offers opportunity to experience joy after healing the wounds of hate, suggesting with her combined words that we can restore America with our revisionist creativity.

Charles Gute redacts racism and hate with editorial prowess. He conceptually revises a single page excerpt from *The White Man’s Bible*, which illuminates possibilities that include offerings of love (see fig. 2). His rewriting suggests: “Let us imagine a future world, a planet that is more culturally unified . . . our presence . . . less exclusive. . . . Economically depressed areas formerly inhabited by our culturally diverse friends will now have been renovated and converted into beautiful public parks where men and women can stroll about without fear, where children can romp and play in safety” (Knight 14). His powerful revision vis-à-vis addition, subtraction, substitution, and rearrangement opens pages to radical possibilities.

FIGURE 2. *Whitewash Wordswap*. (An Excerpt, Piezo print on canvas, 2007) by Charles Gute. Photo courtesy of the Holter Museum.

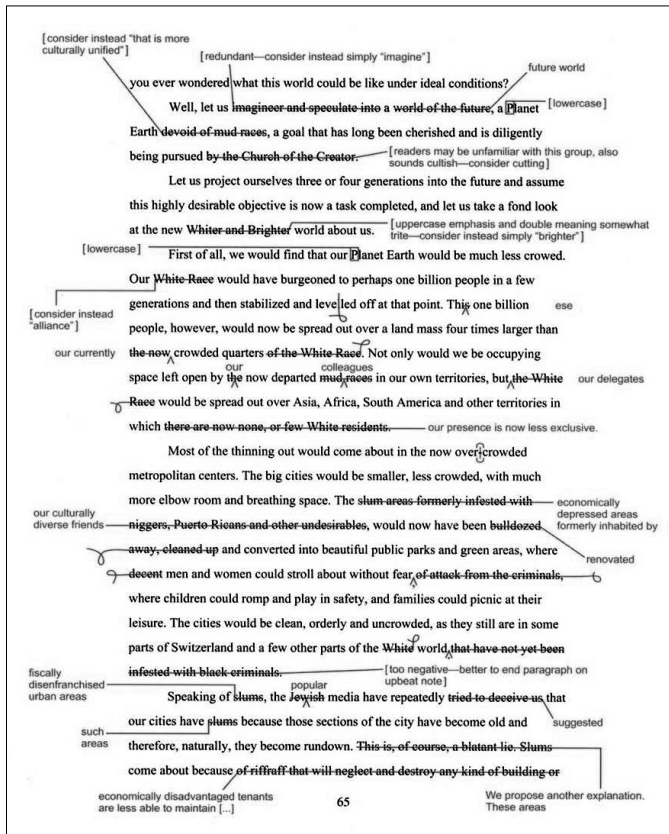
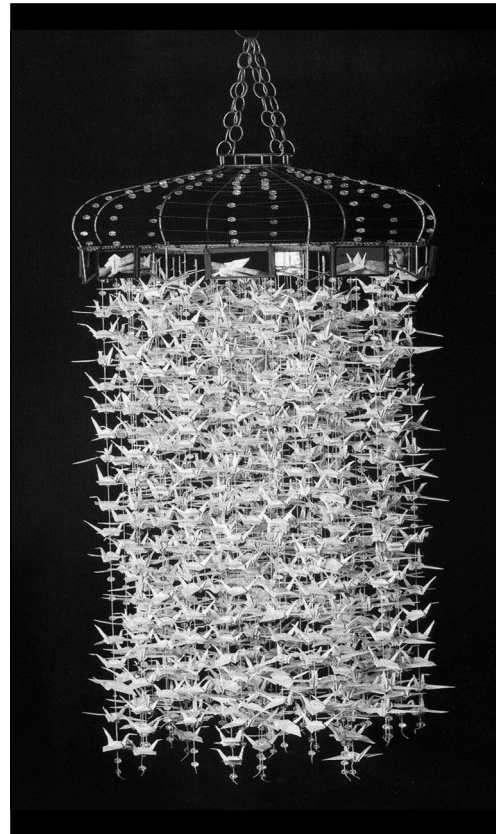


FIGURE 3. *Hope*. Origami, mixed media, 2007 by Clarissa Sligh. Photo courtesy of the Holter Museum.



Other notable revisions and imaginative techniques for transforming hate include a plastic-sheet cube full of brilliantly colored paper cranes painted and folded from pages of *The White Man's Bible* by Philadelphia schoolchildren and their teachers; a spring-styled reconstruction and rebuttal reminiscent of the old children's folding game known as "the fortune teller" ([http://www.mathematische-basteleien.de/fortune\\_teller.htm](http://www.mathematische-basteleien.de/fortune_teller.htm)); a collation of books that have literally been painted clean; and a winged mobile of immaculate paper cranes readying for flight toward the promising ether of the heavens (see fig. 3).

These revisions from the Holter Museum demonstrate that we can transform negative influences, use our imaginative insights to understand the past, and apply our creative talents to build a healthier world community for ourselves and our students. They offer insight into possibilities for

other subversive revisions we might undertake in our classrooms.

### Big Mistake Art Event

Geraldine Pete, a Diné (Navajo) student in the University of Montana's graduate School of Fine Arts, installed her "Big Mistake Art Event" at the annual Kyi-Yo Powwow produced by the UM Indian club (April 20–22, 2012). Pete hauled rolls of art paper 30 feet long and 3½ feet wide to the Adams Event Center on campus. On them she copied the first few articles of the Hellgate Treaty of 1855, the one that ostensibly created the Flathead Indian Reservation in western Montana. The Hellgate Treaty, signed at Council Grove west of Missoula, Montana, in July 1855, was one of a series of treaties negotiated between the U.S. government and Indian tribes of the Northwest. Isaac Stevens, Indian commissioner and the governor of Washington

Territory, led talks with representatives of the Bitterroot Salish, Pend d'Oreille, and Kootenai. Communication problems were said to be rampant. "Not a tenth of what was said was understood by either side," reported a Jesuit priest who observed the negotiations. When Chief Victor of the Salish resisted leaving the Bitterroot valley, his people's traditional homeland, Stevens inserted confusing language that established a "conditional reservation" south of Lolo Creek, 8 miles south of Missoula, at the northern reach of Salish country. It took another 36 years, but all Salish were eventually banished from their homelands and forced to remove to the Flathead Indian Reservation in the Mission valley 20 miles north of Missoula. Similar scenes played out all over the country during white westward movement (Briggeman).

Pete installed the "Big Mistake Art Event" as part of Kyi-Yo powwow's theme, "Empowerment through Education." She encouraged powwow attendees "to have their way" with the treaty (Briggeman). Pete provided erasers, a pink one labeled "For Big Mistakes" and a blue one that said "OOPS." Her artist's statement for the event said that it was meant to provide "comic relief for a devastating historic occurrence." Before the end of the installation, many individuals had added to or subtracted from the piece, revising a tragic chapter in a people's history and erasing boundaries between cultures, Native and otherwise. For many powwow-goers, the revision experience was cathartic, an opportunity to look at a disturbing truth, and gain some power over it.

### Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Montana Revisions

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were adopted by the Montana Board of Education in May 2011 (MCSS). CCSS were created through an initiative sponsored by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers and have been adopted by 45 states and three US territories. Although tenets of No Child Left Behind focus singularly on reading and math abilities, CCSS have added strong attention to writing as a core literacy standard. And Montana has gone even further by adding a social justice component.

In 1972, Montana ratified what is considered to be one of the most progressive constitutions in the world. It explicitly advocates human rights

and environmental protections, and it instantiates an ethics of peacemaking and peacebuilding. In it, the state pledges to recognize "the distinct and unique cultural heritage of the American Indians" and commits itself in its "educational goals to the preservation of their cultural integrity" (Montana Code and Constitution). "The twin hopes of Montana's constitutional obligation—'Indian Education for All,' (IEFA)" writes Montana State Superintendent of Public Instruction Denise Juneau (Mandan Hidatsa), are that "Indian students will feel themselves welcomed when they see themselves reflected in their school hallways" and curricula, and that "negative stereotypes will be replaced by an accurate understanding of Indian history and the federal government's trust duty" to Indian peoples (3). IEFA is the first educational policy of its kind in the country. Although efforts to improve education for and about American Indian peoples are underway in other states, Montana is the first state that is engaged in a related comprehensive curriculum revision for all public school students.

When Montana adopted CCSS, a group of K–16 Montana educators were tasked with revising the original standards to reflect Montana's constitutional commitment to "Indian Education for All" (Olsen 1). These revisions are relatively simple additions, yet profound in their reach (see fig. 4). To be considered literate in Montana means, among other worthy tenets, to know about Native American tribes, cultures, and ways of understanding connected to our state (Olsen 2). As Montana Office of Public Instruction's Director of Indian Education Mandy Smoker Broaddus (Assiniboine/Sioux) has pointed out, Montana's revision of CCSS to add Indian Education goals, especially in the reading, writing, and English skills sections of the initiative, will help American Indian students bridge the achievement gap. Revision of MCSS to include Indian Education goals provides Montana teachers with unique opportunities. As Casey Olsen, high school English teacher and a member of the faculty team that engaged in revision, articulated, "It can help us to reduce prejudice in our classrooms across the curriculum and across grade-levels" (3). CCSS revision helps Montana "create an equity pedagogy to close the achievement gap . . . and [to] create an empowering school culture and social structure as long as we are genuine and purposeful in our inclu-

**FIGURE 4.** Common Core State Standards Revised into Montana Common Core Standards

Standards	CCSS	MCCS
Reading Informational Texts (Standard 6)	Analyze multiple accounts of the same event or topic, noting important similarities and differences in the point of view they represent.	Analyze multiple accounts of the same event or topic, including those of historical and contemporary American Indian events and topics, noting important similarities and differences in the point of view they represent.
Writing (Standard 7)	Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and refocusing the inquiry when appropriate.	Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and refocusing the inquiry when appropriate. Include sources and/or topics by and about American Indians.
Literacy History/Social Studies (Standard 4)	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10; how the use of "sovereignty" in official documents impacts political and legal relationships).

From: Olsen, Casey. "Montana's Common Core: Indian Education for All & Best Literacy Practices." Montana Writing Summit Presentation. Helena, MT: September 24, 2012.

sion of 'Indian Education for All' in our implementation of the MCCS" (Olsen 3).

### The Forgotten: Voices from the Gap, a Community Training on the African American Achievement Gap in Tacoma Public Schools

In October 2010, the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington, hosted a national conference, "Race and Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning for Justice." During the conference, a group of middle school and high school students who attend an after-school study program at Peace Community Church in Tacoma's Hilltop neighborhood, one of the toughest in Tacoma, gave a spoken-word performance, "The Forgotten: Voices from the Gap." Under facilitation of Peace's Education Director, Laurie Fisher Ruiz, these students, who attend Peace after school so they can study in a warm, dry, and safe space, had carefully read Tacoma Public Schools' (TPS) official statistical report of factors illustrative of TPS's African American Achievement Gap. Their spoken-word performance, modeled after George Ella Lyons' poem "Where I'm From," lent their voices, vision, and experiences to speak back to the report and offered ideas about what was needed to help them succeed. They spoke about

"being from" the violence and drug use in their neighborhood, "being from" a lack of money for such necessities as food and heat, and "being from" the absence of parents who loved them, but who had to work long hours to keep a roof over their heads. They spoke about "being from" teachers who only saw them as numbers on an achievement gap report, and they cried out for those teachers to really see them in the fullness of their troubled circumstances and to still believe in their ability to succeed. Their performances gave voice to their experiences, revised understandings of an achievement gap, and offered an eloquent coda to a sterile statistical report. The raw power of student voice illustrated the sheer power of revision to work for justice as well as to see what students can do when given the opportunities to revise.

### *Echoes of Brown: Youth Documenting and Performing the Legacy of Brown v. Board of Education*

Reminiscent of Tacoma students' performances and illustrative of additional possibilities is a collection available in print with an accompanying DVD, *Echoes of Brown v. Board of Education* (Fine, Roberts, and Torre et al.), that captures youth and elders in conversation

about the history and legacy of the Supreme Court decision that ended legal segregation of public schools. Thirteen students who participated in a summer institute at the Art and Social Justice Institute in New York City studied the historical Supreme Court decision and produced a performance of dance and spoken word that “addresses the (in)equities and possibilities of schooling today in the United States” (Fine, Roberts, and Torre et al. i). Their evocative performances show how revision can be used to create contexts in which students speak back to power and learn to live with hope (for an example, see fig. 5).

### Jefferson High School Aptitude Test

The final example I highlight draws from Linda Christensen’s *Reading, Writing and Rising Up: Teaching about Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word*. Here Christensen discusses how she studies the history and racist past of the SATs with her mostly African American students. She helps her students analyze the verbal instructions, the language, the “objectives” of each section of the SAT and demonstrates how the language and culture of the SATs reflects the world of white, upper-class society (113). After her students take sample SAT tests a few times, Christensen asks them to revise the test by constructing questions that use the culture, content, and vocabulary of their own Jefferson High School (Portland, Oregon). Her high school students then take their tests to education classes at the local university and ask preservice teachers to take their test and “to imagine it is a high stakes test that will determine their future.” Afterwards, Christensen’s students discuss aspects of testing and language with these future teachers hoping they will be “enlightened” by the high school students’ work. Christensen’s students see “that what they learn in school can make a difference in the world, and so can they” (113). Such simple

but profound acts of revision demonstrate our capacity for teaching English audaciously in ways that help people stop hurting and killing each other.

### Teaching for Peace


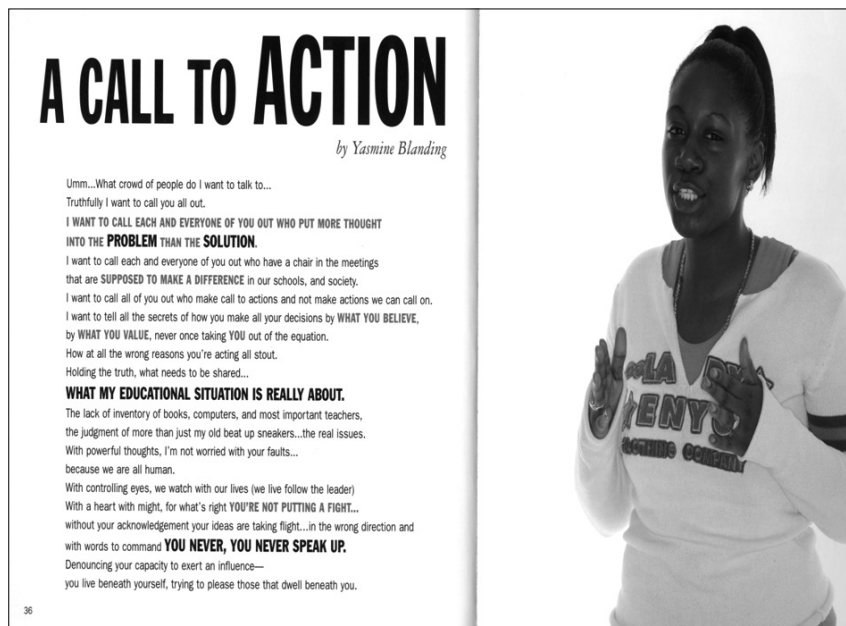
We can no longer allow our fears to silence our voices and push us back into the shadows. We must not retreat from our ethical, professional, and political responsibilities to speak back to those who would take our power from us and continue a legacy of damage to our students. We must take charge of our teaching lives and students’ learning lives. We must “question, stand, speak and act” for justice on behalf of democracy, as environmental writer Terry Tempest Williams has directed (10). To do less is to comply with violence, fascism, and injustice. Yes, it will take cunning acts of subversive revision such as these to which I refer here. We must find local examples that dampen students’ enthusiasm for learning and we must exploit them to give students opportunities to revise. We must dare, as Mahatma Gandhi taught, to “be the change we want to see in the world.” We must audaciously dare to teach English for peace. 

FIGURE 5. From *Echoes of Brown* (Teachers College Press, 2004).



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## Notes

1. This is a revision of a question posed to Mary Rose O'Reilly as a graduate teaching assistant in composition in the 1960s at University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee by Distinguished Professor Ihab Hassan, “Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?” (9).

2. NCBI is a nonprofit organization based in Washington, DC, whose mission is to help eliminate prejudice and intergroup conflict in communities throughout the world. See <http://www.ncbi.org/>.

3. This is not to ignore the great need for environmental justice, as well. See the January 2011 *English Journal* (“Green English”).

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## READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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In this lesson from ReadWriteThink.org, students participate in a simulation of a “Peace Journey” as they engage in a variety of literacy activities. Each student responds to an imaginary advertisement, role plays, works in small groups to develop a visual map, and creates (and performs) a skit that reflects his or her developing notions of peace. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/peace-journey-using-process-269.html>