

A Welcome, A Warning, and A Wish: On Entering a Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership for Social Justice in the Year 2020

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journals.sagepub.com/home/qix**Bryant Keith Alexander**¹ 

Abstract

After the cancellation of the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (2020) due to the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), the substantive content of my presentation for the plenary, “Higher Education in the Time of Trump: Resistance and Critique” came into confluence with my invitation to deliver the 2020 Keynote to the 17th Incoming Cohort of the doctoral program in Educational Leadership for Social Justice, School of Education, Loyola Marymount University. This presentation delivered via ZOOM on June 18, 2020, calls forth a broader confluence of our current political climate under the “leadership” of Donald J. Trump, COVID-19, and national social justice activism linked with the Black Lives Matter Movement. Truly we are living protest and recovery in repressive times with a connectivity between the three. This message is both particular and plural to the audience that it was originally presented, and now to a diverse readership in these repressive times.

Keywords

educational leadership, social justice, racism, confluence, Donald J. Trump, Coronavirus (Covid-19), global cultural flows

Good afternoon. It is a pleasure to share a part of your orientation. You are an impressive new cohort, adding to an illustrious history of doctoral students who have preceded you in this program. I always like to begin any address (like my scholarship) with a working title; a working title that helps to frame the direction of my intention and to guide the impulse of my exploration. A title as both purpose and project, as well as aggregate of an argument; a position statement, if you will that I am building. This as many of you will do with the rigor of writing papers in this program and eventually in writing the title that will signal the quest of your dissertation.

So, today I want to frame my brief time with you with the working title: “A Welcome, A Warning, and A Wish: On Entering a Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership for Social Justice in the Year 2020.”

First, “A Welcome”

As many as you know, Loyola Marymount University (LMU) has a powerful mission statement that includes three pillars that are often cited and recited: The encouragement of learning; the education of the whole person; and the service of faith and the promotion of justice.¹ As I welcome you to campus, I welcome you into the

recognition of this now shared mission statement as a joint commitment to encouraging an integration of knowledge; in which “faith and reason bear witness to the unity of all truth” (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 1990, #17) and to instill in our students the abilities for lifelong learning that includes but is not limited to: critical thinking, the ability to research, the practice of discernment, the ability to ask the important questions, and the ability to apply that knowledge in meaningful ways for self and others.

As I welcome you to the university, I welcome you into the recognition of this now shared mission statement as a joint commitment to the encouragement of integrating for students and diverse others in educational contexts—their thinking, feeling, choosing, evolving self (unifying their mind, body, and spirit)—into the educational endeavor.

As I welcome you to the university, I welcome you into the recognition of this now shared mission statement as a joint recognition that the service of faith (like any

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constructed purpose of education, educational leadership, and social commitment) is incomplete without the promotion of justice for all especially for the least among us, who, through social inequities, don't have equal resources and opportunities.

I welcome you into the recognition of this now shared, mission statement as a joint commitment that the purposes of education (plural) must include the critical processes of *information, formation, and transformation*: information—not just the actuality of knowing but the diverse processes of seeking knowledge for diverse peoples in diverse social and cultural contexts. And formation—not just the development of one's spiritual or religious self but the process of forming one's attitudes, beliefs, values, and politics; the very ground on which they (we) stand that motivates action; a positionality of self and toward society which I hope is emancipatory in nature for the common good. And to recognize how information and formation leads to one's commitment to the transformation of self and society and indeed the world in which we live in.

And as I welcome you to the university, I welcome you into the recognition of this, now shared, mission statement as a joint commitment that the service of faith and the promotion of justice are interrelated constructions; religious pluralism grounded in ideals for the common good that participate in the struggle for justice in ways appropriate not just to this campus community—but to the stretch of our human community; and as a requirement not simply an option that applies both specifically to where we are at LMU—and what all programs in educational leadership for social justice should be instilling—as we/they are preparing our professoriate (productive citizens) to do in the world.²

So welcome.

Welcome to LMU, to the mission of the university, and how that mission undergirds this doctoral program in “Educational Leadership for Social Justice.” In welcoming you in this way—I want to also share with you one aspect of my own research, and how that resonates with the LMU mission. Work that preceded my time here and actually, in part, drew me to this institution. While serving as a Dean, College of Communication and Fine Arts, I am also an active scholar. My research works at the intersections of Performance Studies, Communication Studies, Race/Culture/Gender Studies, and Educational Studies.

My dissertation, completed at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (1998), seems like a life-time ago, but not really. The dissertation was entitled *Performing Culture in the Classroom: An Instructional (Auto) Ethnography of Black Male Teacher/Student Negotiations of Culture*. A study in which I was exploring the classroom as a cultural site—a confluence of attitudes, beliefs, and values; a practiced place in which competing and conflicting notions of culture collide—both in the curriculum (what to teach, how and why), relational challenges between

teachers and students (as both particular and plural), and societal expectations of what education should achieve. In my own interests—I was focused on the relational encounter between Black male teachers and Black male students in the predominately White University. A moment in which for some, the visible materiality of bodies assumes a common historical struggle that is reduced into a common character. This without the recognition of how culture is a performative set of practices that may be informed in some ways by heritage, but are locally prescribed; where and how you were raised and the meaning that you have ascribed to being and becoming. The classroom space between Black male teachers and Black male students can become a place of cultural struggle and cultural negotiation layered onto and through the educational endeavor.

It was in that work, over 20 years ago, that I began a love for the critical qualitative methodologies of ethnography, autoethnography, instructional autoethnographies/biographies, and performance ethnography that have informed the body of my scholarship. Such approaches have also been informed by notions on the complexity of *intersectionality*, “intersectionality as a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects” in the personal lives and being of people.³ These ways of thinking, researching, writing about, describing, and articulating the lived experience of people—mostly Black people and members of the LGBTQ+ community in shifting aspects of cultural life and my own positionality within those locations—has shaped my sense of self and my social responsibilities. Establishing an agenda that is always guided with the intention of coming to deep understandings that speak to truth and contributes to strategies of change; as an approach to academic activism in the classroom on the pages and the stages of everyday life. Thus, sharing those insights through scholarly and creative activity, through applied research in the dailiness of my teaching and administrative life and then working directly with members of those communities in their own processes of knowing, being, and becoming.

Second, “A Warning”

One of my favorite poems is “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” by Langston Hughes. He writes,

I've known rivers:

*I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than
the flow of human blood in human veins.*

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

*I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.*

*I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.*

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*⁴

Separate from the beautiful lyricism of this piece, I appreciate the economy of language in historicizing the Black experience without giving short shrift of that struggled survival. The poem traces our Black history through the metaphor of rivers; the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, and the Mississippi.

Rivers as a metaphor for life; as baptismal, spiritual and sacred countenance.

Rivers as sustenance for agriculture, industry and the fuel for labor.

Rivers as yearning for adventure and freedom; as cultural location and identity both fixed and fluid.

Rivers as sites of struggle for direction, domain and destiny; and the historical struggle over river rights and the benefits and bounty of rivers.

The struggle over the fertility of rivers—like Black bodies to be bred, owned and exploited.

Rivers as invocation of travel; travel as both mobility and survival; as middle passages and *travels* in the folk sense of Blacks living-to-tell-the-stories of slavery and oppression.

The poem speaks to the induced and forced labor of rivers with effects, affects, and artifacts that stand the test of time—like the construction of the Egyptian pyramids and the historical monuments to slavery that still stand as infrastructure to these United States of America.⁵

The poem is a lyrical argument about the Black spirit steeped in struggle and the longing for salvation. For me, the poem suggests the contiguous flows of Black cultural identity that, like a river, stretches across the human experience; across the diaspora of place and space—as freeman and slave; across the gamut of transfiguration from free human beings in the homeland of Africa to chattel property transported on water to diasporic destinations reconfigured as only 3/5 human, *then*, begrudgingly released as freed-persons, only to be immersed in the continued depths of social struggle and survival in this country that we still experience today.⁶

As a Black-gay-male-teacher-scholar-administrator, I appreciate the celebration of the critical poetic and the historic

performative of Black creative reinvention in/of the poem. But I don't get completely lost in the poetics and performative aesthetics of the piece. I don't, because I see the poem as also narrating a pained history. And while rivers are romantic, they are also sites of contestation with runs, ruins, and returns that haunt us all. Black bodies were sold up and down rivers like the Mississippi during slavery.⁷

So, I continue here with the notion of a confluence; a confluence of rivers, time, and space. And the notion of a confluence in the streams of consciousness of this current historical moment, which is both particular and plural; both in the exactitude of the moment of the writing—but like a river, stretches both forward and backwards to question origins and potentials of future effects. I am fixated on the notion of rivers. Not the romanticization of the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, and the Mississippi but the turbulent conflux of myopic leadership, indiscriminate disease, and racism as the persistent scourge on blackness in this country. But now as rivers and streams of consciousness; and how the confluence of these cultural and epidemiological flows find a problematic potency in this time.

So now I am reframing Langston Hughes's poem as a painful history lesson about racism and struggle; one with some resistance and critique. The piece speaks to me now at a confluence of *global cultural flows* in the year 2020.⁸ A confluence—not as a gentle coming together of rivers, but a turbulent crossing in which rivers carrying their own chattel are challenged to maintain their own oblivious purpose and pathways in resistance to each other. What happens is each river vies for control of its destiny; each river holds ground of its character and charisms; each river refuses to compromise creating a rapids of encounter careening and colliding to retain its path thus contaminating each with the spit, silt, sediment, salinity, pollution, and politics of its purpose—that are truly viral.⁹ Each contributing and creating a spectacle of nature not unlike the spectacle of human social encounter in these troubled times. In this moment, I am writing at a confluence; we are living in the rapids of three intersecting historical realities:

1. The presence, politics, and practices of our 45th President of these United States, Donald J. Trump—whose politics, temperament, and decisions are ideologically reshaping the country and the world as we knew it. This has particular impacts on our educational systems from K-12 and beyond—even the presumed space of privilege that we currently sit in higher education with devastating effects on communities of color, border crossers seeking opportunity, and the sanctity of women's bodies. Thank God today June 18, 2020—on your day entering this program, the United States Supreme Court announced its decision upholding the legality of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) programs. Maybe that is the truest example of *educational leadership* in Washington, D.C., our nation's capital,

that we have witnessed in recent years.¹⁰ But let's not sit too comfortably.

2. The second stream is the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, an unprecedented infectious disease risk for all persons—that has had once unfathomable impacts on life, our practice of culture our everyday circulation in place and space; and changing what teaching, schooling, and education looks like during this difficult time. The once resistant outcry against “on-line” teaching and “remote” learning is made mute and mandated during this current time. We recognize how mandated social distancing in the classroom challenges questions of any human social engagement. And of course, let us not forget the disproportioned impact the virus is having on communities of color because of decades of structural racism, unstable/unsafe work environments, limited access to quality health care, and so on.¹¹
3. And the third tributary is the national rise of civil unrest and activism surrounding the policing murder of unarmed Black people in America, triggered by the particular suffocation death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, MN. And the subsequent murder of Rayshard Brooks at a Wendy's Restaurant in Atlanta George (to the date of me writing this essay).¹² This along with the deaths of Brionna Taylor, Sandra Bland, and so many of our Black and Brown sisters killed by virtue of race and circumstance for whom we must learn to #SayHerName also. To highlight the gender-specific ways in which Black women and women of color are disproportionately affected by fatal acts of racial injustice in this country.

We must recognize how these national moments in a confluence of destruction become situated in higher education as objects of critique, contamination, containment, and contention. These issues and their rise in the year 2020 are not disconnected from each other; leadership (educational or otherwise), the delayed response to the spread and conditions of disease, and the dis-ease and rise of racism and how these impact particular bodies. These issues have all become mediated campaign strategies of continued power and control with fiscal and capital impacts in trade wars between countries with local impacts. The issues of these confluent issues reinforce political factions while people are dying. Each surge in my head, heart, and stomach relative to my own positionality as a Black gay/male/academic/administrator.

And the fact that I am presenting this welcome to you on June 18 only a day before June 19—commonly celebrated by African Americans as Juneteenth—is not lost on me. Juneteenth, also known as Freedom Day, Jubilee Day, and Celebration-Liberation Day, is an African American

holiday celebrated to commemorate June 19, 1865, when Union general Gordon Granger read federal orders in Galveston, Texas, that all previously enslaved people in Texas were free; ending slavery in the United States. Two and a half years after President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which had become official January 1, 1863. Justice delayed indeed is justice denied—and still persists—even now. African Americans recognize and celebrate that day, while also recognizing the level of struggle that African Americans continue to face, to be truly equal, and to be truly free. We celebrate Juneteenth with resistance and critique because in this country, we must still proclaim that **Black Lives Matter**.

Echoing brother Langston Hughes: *My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

If you have not sensed the warning here it is: You are entering a doctoral program in Educational Leadership for Social Justice at this historical moment. A time in which we will all be challenged to address the social, cultural, political, and practical implications of these issues and take a clear operational sense of what leadership means for the common good. What health care and social vulnerability mean during a pandemic, and beyond? And what is the role of educators and scholars in/as activists to address these issues in our educational institutions and on the streets? What is our role in resistance and critique in the continued necessity to address the social scourge of racism and violence on Black and Brown bodies in this country? What is the role of learned folks like you and me—in making a difference? The warning signs are all around us that we need to address these issues; both the explicit and implicit features that make each possible present and more potent in our lives—both today and the hopeful tomorrows to come.

Warning—enter your program with your eyes wide open—as you navigate your way through the highways and byways to get here (both literally and figuratively) recognizing that higher education is not a protected space. There is nowhere to hide. In fact, the White Ivory Tower is more under attack than ever. Critiques about the rarefied air that we breath and our complicity in perpetuating social/racial/class difference and indifference—and our inability to respond to the needs of *the tired, the poor, and the huddled masses longing to be free* to which this country once welcomed and sheltered—abound! We are not immune. We are complicit. What is our role to play? The space of higher education should be a practiced place for social transformation. We must get busy doing the social justice work for the world in which we live through education and action for today and the hopeful tomorrows to come.

Warning—you are entering a doctoral program in Educational Leadership for Social Justice at a university like LMU—with that powerful mission statement—to

which you must be committed *to be the change that you wish to see in the world*.¹³ There are no other choices. While we may be bound to the past, we are destined to create the potentialities of the future. We must create new paths of possibility for all.

Third, “A Wish”

I wish you the focused energy and commitment to enter this program with your own purpose. But to enter with an open mind, body, and spirit; open to the possibilities and potentialities of what the program can give to you—and *maybe* more importantly, what you will bring to the program and take away with you. Take away to apply in real ways with positive impacts on your diverse communities. As a cohort you will have a tremendous impact on the dynamism of each other’s educational experiences. You will have a phenomenal faculty here in the School of Education and affiliate faculty from differing contributing disciplines throughout the university. Faculty who will challenge and support you in different ways. They will marshal you not only into the professoriate, but into the work of being transformational educational leaders for social justice. But your colleagues sitting next to you (though currently situated in these virtual ZOOM boxes, but still sharing and intimacy of knowing) will also have an impact on your educational experience. Lean into each other’s possibilities and push each other to and toward your potentialities.

I have had the pleasure of serving as an external dissertation committee member for a range of students in this program and at universities throughout the country. Here at LMU, I have served on five dissertations that challenged not only my expertise but helped me to expand my ways of thinking about the issues, and about myself as a transformational leader: For example, Frederick Smith, from a Student Affairs and Multicultural training background who explored, *The Politics of Ethnic Studies, Cultural Centers, and Student Activism: The Voices of Black Women at the Academic Borderlands*. He asked the questions: “To what extent are the voices of Black women faculty, staff, and students silenced or elevated at the academic borderlands of university life?” And, “How do the politics of Ethnic Studies, Cultural Centers, and student activism impact the campus life for Black women faculty, staff, and students?”¹⁴ Patricia William in a project entitled, *A Paut Neteru Journey: An Autoethnographic Study of a Black Female Charter School Leader Using an Afrocentric Approach* in which she asked:

In what ways have social and material inequalities shaped [her] journey as a Black female charter school leader of color? [And] What lessons can be learned from the obstacles and experiences encountered during [her] journey as a Black female school leader of color?¹⁵

Terrell B. Sales’ research on *An Emancipatory Pedagogy of Jesus Christ: Towards a Decolonizing Epistemology of Education and Theology* that examined the interconnectivity of theology and education, focusing on the contributing efforts of the Black Church and Jesus Christ as exemplars for ending oppression. As he asked, “What can the pedagogy of Jesus Christ and His praxis as a teacher contribute to the field of critical education today?” And “What can we learn from a critical praxis of Jesus Christ the teacher in relation to educational leadership for social justice?”¹⁶ Or the work of Kahlil Alm Mustafa Gasper on *Writing Ourselves Into Existence: A Teaching Artist’s Autoethnography of a Liberatory Hip-Hop Pedagogy*—the title of which explicates his purpose.¹⁷ Each of these phenomenally articulate and smart individuals established their positionality within their research. Their processes and their work were deeply critical and emancipatory. As was the work of Marcus K. Hughes, Sr. on *The Power of Empathy: A Critical Narrative Inquiry of Cultural Competencies in New Teachers*, which provides yet another template of sociality both in the class and in the community.¹⁸

The notion of “critical” is really an engagement of discernment, examining the deep meaning in any given situation with the potentials and possibilities of transformation. Scholar D. Soyini Madison offers me a notion of what critical means in doing critical research. Madison writes that critical work seeks

to articulate and identify hidden forces and ambiguities that operate beneath appearances; to guide judgments and evaluations emanating from our discontent; to direct our attention to the critical expressions within different interpretive communities relative to their unique symbol systems, customs, and codes; to demystify the ubiquity and magnitude of power; and to provide insight and inspire acts of justice; and to name and analyze what is intuitively felt.¹⁹

Madison’s construction is aptly applied to the work that I have assisted, witnessed, and read from a range of students entering and successfully exiting this doctoral program. Because their work asked deep questions and entertained rigorous considerations related to educational leadership *in/as/for* social justice. And maybe this notion of doing critical work will guide and undergird your time in this program, and the quality of work that you engage with *critical passion*. Work that will make a difference beyond the grade, beyond the new letters behind your name at the end, and well into the diverse communities that you will serve. It has to—for the sake of self and society—because practicing an engaged *culturally informed criticality* is what this country needs now in educational and presidential leadership, in the negotiated halting of the pandemic, and the needed and sustained response to racism and inequity in this country.

The definitional frame for this program that you have now signed up for states: The program will *accommodate working professionals while they acquire the knowledge and skills to become critically-conscious-leaders ready to make a positive impact in education.*²⁰ This is what the world needs now. Those with accrued skills and harnessed energies who will bring their talents to meet at the confluence of the world's greatest needs: at the rivers of discontent, disease, and dis-ease—to make a transformative difference and to calm the troubled waters.

So, in conclusion: *My Welcome, My Warning, and My Wish* for you are tied together with a ribbon as a gift. A gift that I hope you will reopen slowly and reflect upon deeply as you take it out of the box later and reexamine its details. In your close reflection, I hope that you will see my selection for you was chosen with a level of care and consideration for your purpose. Words crafted with critical intention that were maybe easy to hear, but maybe not too comfortable to listen to and absorb—less you become complacent. Because this was not a gift for your entertainment. It is an early contribution to your processes of *information, formation, and transformation.*²¹

This is a gift that will fit you all differently but will hopefully shift toward your particular needs. A gift that is also a set of tools and perspectives to which you may determine how to use with critical intention as you embark on this new and exciting journey.

The world awaits your educational leadership for social justice. And as your colleague in the struggle, I will meet you at the confluence for change.

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Notes

1. See: the Loyola Marymount University Mission Statements: <https://mission.lmu.edu/mission/missionstatement/>.
2. These are extended interpretive frames of the LMU Mission Statement.
3. See: “Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later” <https://www.law.columbia.edu/pt-br/news/2017/06/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality>. See also: Crenshaw (1995).
4. See: Langston Hughes: <https://poets.org/poem/negro-speaks-rivers>.

5. See: James Pasley (2019).
6. See: Burt Kaufman, Chris Wolfe, Hays Cummins’ syllabus for the course “Rivers: Images, Policy, and Science (An Interdisciplinary Perspective),” School of Interdisciplinary Studies (Western College Program), Miami University, Spring 2002. <http://jrscience.wcp.muohio.edu/courses/rivers02.html>.
7. Langston Hughes speaks to the notion of Black bodies being sold up the Mississippi River as an inspiring component of his poem. This along with a reference to Abraham Lincoln’s witness of slavery on the Mississippi that instigated his hatred for slavery and foreshadowed the Emancipation Proclamation <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cKDOghghMU.>>
8. See: Arjun Appadurai (1990). And Artem Cheprasov’s: The Five Dimensions of Global Cultural Flow. <https://study.com/academy/lesson/the-five-dimensions-of-global-cultural-flow.html>.
9. See: TwistedSifter (2012).
10. See: DACA: https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/19pdf/18-587_5ifl.pdf.
11. See: PennToday (2020) and Harmeeet Kaur (2020).
12. See: Chris Grave (2020), and Robin Young & Serena McMahon (2020).
13. “Be the change that you wish to see in the world” is most often associated with Mahatma Gandhi.
14. See the dissertation: Frederick Smith (2018).
15. See the dissertation: Patricia William (2018).
16. See the dissertation: Terrell B. Sales (2017).
17. See the dissertation: Kahlil Almustafa Gasper (2018).
18. See the dissertation: Marcus K. Hughes (2017).
19. See: D. Soyini Madison (2005, p. 13).
20. See: School of Education, Loyola Marymount University. <https://soe.lmu.edu>, <https://soe.lmu.edu/academics/doctoral/>.
21. Link this back to the university Mission statement, the Education of the Whole Person: <https://mission.lmu.edu/mission/missionstatement/educationofthewholeperson/>.

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