

After Empire: An Ethic of Reckoning, Reparations and Risk

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Preface: Democracy's Futures

These are momentous times, for we are facing a global rise in authoritarianism and are engaged in a struggle for the very soul of democracy. All that we hold dear – interdependence, reason, compassion, respect for all human beings and stewardship of the natural world that sustains us, is under direct, unabashed assault. On November 6, 2024, we saw in the United States something that has also happened in many democracies throughout the world, the defeat of incumbent leaders who are committed to the practice of democracy and the success of right-wing authoritarians.¹ In the United States, many groups are well aware of what is required to counter authoritarianism over the long haul and many are also exploring what can be done now to contain the damage of an authoritarian presidency and to build an expansive and genuinely multiracial and socially just democracy.

As the theologians Mitri Raheb and Miquel De La Torre state, “we live in a time of resurgent authoritarianism worldwide” in which “the empire is no longer shy to remove the mask.”² What does it take to contain this resistance to full inclusion and to counter the assaults on the democratic process that are occurring throughout the world? And, what does it take to nurture and expand the catalytic and creative work of those seeking to build regenerative, equitable and globally engaged communities?

When I wrote *After Empire* in the early 2000s, I grounded the rejection of empire in a recognition of the devastating damage of imperialism to Indigenous Peoples in the Americas and in the recognition that what we find in Indigenous Peoples is a radically different view of the social contract, one of ongoing accountability for damage done, and rather than domination of the many by the few, an expansive form of community shaped by working with and learning from the wisdom of all.

In this revised edition, I explore how the rejection of empire entails building communities to counter white nationalism. To do this work requires an ethic of reckoning, risk, reciprocity and reparations for all those damaged by the devastations of imperial power. Here I provide a humanist grounding for such an ethic, one that emerges from learning from the wisdom of Indigenous Peoples, from Engaged Buddhists, from Christians of all races who are committed to

¹ “Democracy at the World’s Ballot Boxes, New York Times, October 7, 2024.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/07/world/democracy-voting-ballot-boxes.html?smid=em-share>.

Cameron Abadi, “Year of Angry Election,” Foreign Policy, December 26, 2004. Foreignpolicy.com

“Voters in more than 60 countries, comprising more than 40 percent of the planet’s population, went to the polls in 2024. The countries ranged from full democracies to outright autocracies to various types of regimes in between. Even more baffling is that [there was] a single political narrative. Incumbents were punished, newcomers were rewarded, and previously fringe views cemented a place in the political mainstream.”

²Miguel A. De La Torre and Mitri Raheb, *Resisting Occupation: A Global Struggle for Liberation*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2022, pp. 240-241.

expansive social justice and from People of Color throughout the world who are working for reparations and for expansive forms of economic, cultural and political interdependence.

At this moment in history, we have a clear challenge and opportunity. There is the long-term challenge of educating for expansive civic engagement and there is the immediate challenge of responding to growing attacks on the very structure and practices of democracy. In chapter five I will explore the ramifications of a social contract based on generative democracy, and how it can be enhanced by learning from the centuries long practices of such forms of democracy by Indigenous peoples. There I also provide more detail on the ways in which these practices are being taught in educational systems in the United States and internationally.³

In many organizations we find a call to an expansive and generative democracy based on acknowledging forthrightly the dangers that we are facing and the risks that must be taken, as well as the profound satisfaction, meaning and joy of working together for an expansive socially just and environmentally regenerative common good. To achieve these goals, the issue is not just authoritarianism or democracy, but do we have a competitive or a deliberative and generative democracy. We can have much more than competitive democracy – asserting our positions and winning the vote - but can express a generative democracy of genuinely working with and learning from others about how best to address economic, environmental and social problems, and how to empower diverse groups to be part of this ongoing process.

I learned of this distinction through the exploration of the nature of the culture and processes of democracy as described by the Hong Kong pro-democracy leader, Benny Tai. Although Tai uses the term ‘deliberative democracy’ rather than ‘generative democracy,’ the process of mutual engagement for a greater good is the same. Benny Tai is a professor of law at Hong Kong University, and was one of the founders of the nonviolent civil disobedience campaign for full democracy, Occupy Central with Love and Peace.⁴ In an essay published in 2018, Tai shares the lessons learned in this movement and their implications for ongoing work for genuine democracy in Hong Kong and throughout the world. Tai states that “what is ‘blossoming now’ in Hong Kong, in this Post-Umbrella Era” is that people are rejecting ‘hierarchical social relationships’ and finding a form of community that values not just individualism, not just community, but free individuals within community.⁵ Tai states that the goal of Occupy Central is and was deliberative democracy, not simply competitive democracy. In a deliberative democracy, people “[make] decisions after a detailed and well-designed deliberative process in which they receive adequate and balanced information on the options and are facilitated to understand the underlying ideas and viewpoints of people holding different opinions.”⁶ At this time, Tai has been convicted of subversion and there is an active suppression of Hong Kong’s democratic movement by the

³ I will explore in more detail the work of the Community-Based Global Learning Collaborative <https://www.cbglcollab.org/>, the Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition <https://www.collegeciviclearning.org/> and the Engagement Scholarship Consortium <https://engagementscholarship.org/>

⁴ Benny Y.T. Tai, “From past to future: Hong Kong’s democratic movement,” *Citizenship, Identity and Social Movements in the New Hong Kong: Localism After the Umbrella Movement*. Edited by Wai-man Lam and Luke Cooper. (New York: Routledge. 2018) p. 155.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.156.

Chinese government. It is an ongoing challenge to find how to support the resilient and innovative activism of the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong.

While the pathways to support the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong are not yet clear, we can continue to learn from their work and also foster the power of deliberative and generative democracy. The foundation for a thriving generative democracy is the cultivation of specific forms of belonging, cultures of reciprocal, accountable, collective efforts to address common threats and support a thriving social good. As Stanley Deetz, professor of organizational studies and organizational communication, describes it in his analysis of generative democracy, at its core is a process in which difference and interdependence are honored and explored, and decisions are based in collaboration and reciprocity.⁷

As we explore how to respond to the authoritarian threats in the United States, we can use the practices of generative democracy within our professions, churches, educational institutions, and political organizations to explore where they are best equipped to protect the ecosystem, democracy, the rule of law and fundamental human rights. There are multiple levers of engagement to support an expansive and generative democracy and the key is to find where we each have specific roles that we can play in resonance with others.

The ACLU provides a clear description of the anti-democratic policy recommendations developed by the Heritage Foundation in *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise, Project 2025*.⁸

Project 2025 is a federal policy agenda and blueprint for a radical restructuring of the executive branch authored and published by former Trump administration officials in partnership with The Heritage Foundation, a longstanding conservative think tank that opposes abortion and reproductive rights, LGBTQ rights, immigrants' rights, and racial equity. Project 2025's largest publication, "Mandate For Leadership," is a 900-page manual for reorganizing the entire federal government agency by agency to serve a conservative agenda.

Project 2025 includes a long list of extreme policy recommendations touching on nearly every aspect of American life, from immigration and abortion rights, to free speech and racial justice. A number of its recommendations rely on support from the executive branch and from Congress. Many other initiatives are outright unconstitutional.⁹

The ACLU describes seven policy changes that will drastically curtail existing freedoms: 'limiting abortion access, mass deportations, abusing warrantless surveillance, unleashing force on protesters, limiting voting access, censoring critical discussion of race, gender and systemic

⁷ Stanley Deetz, the former Director of the Center for the Study of Conflict, Collaboration and Creative Governance and the Peace and Conflict Studies Program at the University of Colorado, Boulder, describes the nature of generative democracies in "Disarticulation and Conflict Transformation: Interactive Design, Collaborative Processes, and Generative Democracy in Thomas G. Matyok and Peter Kellett (eds). *Communication and conflict transformation through local, regional and global engagement*. Lexington books. 2016 pp.4, 14. See also <https://www.standeetz.org/generative-democracy> (Accessed February 18, 2024).

⁸ https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf
<https://www.heritage.org/press/project-2025-publishes-comprehensive-policy-guide-mandate-leadership-the-conservative-promise>

⁹ <https://www.aclu.org/project-2025-explained>

oppression in the classroom, rolling back rights for transgender people.’¹⁰ In response to these threats, the ACLU is involved in four key initiatives “to protect and expand the freedom of all people.”

Going to court to preserve and advance the rights of immigrants, LGBTQ rights, abortion access, nondiscrimination laws, voting rights, and the free speech of all people

Working with Congress members to enact policy solutions to many of the most extreme proposals in Project 2025 and using Congress’s constitutional powers to provide oversight, investigate wrongdoing, and defund executive branch policies that threaten our most fundamental rights and freedoms

Working with state lawmakers around the country to enact proactive laws that protect people from federal interference.

Organizing in communities to educate the public about their rights, the harms of Project 2025, and what they can do to protect and expand our freedoms.¹¹

There are many other organizations taking up this work. For example, in an essay published in the newsletter *Waging Nonviolence: People Powered News and Analysis*, Daniel Hunter claims that individuals and groups can engage in four key forms of action:

Protect People: harm reduction, protect targeted people

Defend Civic Institutions: safeguard democratic institutions (elections, EPA, etc.)

Disrupt and Disobey: strategize acts to support disobedience and protest policy

Build Alternatives: parallel institutions, alternative party platforms, new culture-building.¹²

In a comprehensive working paper published by the Harvard Kennedy School, “Pro-democracy Organizing against Autocracy in the United States: a Strategic Assessment and Recommendations,” the political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks, laid out what can be done at a comprehensive level to contain the rise of authoritarianism in the United States and to lay the foundation for the restoration of a democracy that is open to ongoing expansion and self-critique. This work is grounded in their expertise in the study of nonviolent resistance and social movements throughout the world. They provide a careful analysis of what has been successful in the past in Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Finland, Poland, Chile, South Africa and in the United States.

This report proposes nonviolent resistance strategies and support systems that could be relevant for protecting local communities and subjugated groups, and for informing a broad-based prodemocracy struggle under a hypothetical authoritarian administration. . .
.. An effective strategy will:

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Daniel Hunter, “10 ways to be prepared and grounded now that Trump has won,” *Waging :People Powered News and Analysis*, November 6, 2024. <https://therealnews.com/10-ways-to-be-prepared-and-grounded-now-that-trump-has-won>

Build and maintain a large-scale, multiracial, cross-class, pro-democracy united front that continues to push for structural/institutional reforms and contest for power, even after authoritarianism has appeared to consolidate. The coalition should use ongoing local, county, state, and national elections as flashpoints by which to build a resilient and expansive pro-democracy movement, document election malfeasance, and promote antiauthoritarian platforms, reforms, and talking points for campaigns to take up at all levels of government.

Protect, hold, and build local and community power through alternative institutions to address urgent communal problems, protect minority rights and lives, reinforce an oppositional pro-democratic culture, develop leadership, and build capacity for collective mobilization when needed.

Build pressure to induce defections among those loyal to the autocrat or authoritarian alliance, including through widespread economic noncooperation and labor action.

Prevent, deter, and strengthen resilience to increased threats of state or paramilitary violence through strategic planning and organized and disciplined actions, including building a capacity to anticipate, induce, and exploit defections; broaden inclusive participation; document paramilitary networks; publicize abuses; and demand local accountability.¹³

Chenoweth and Marks make three points that are essential for groups to consider as we shape our defenses of fundamental freedoms. First, the strategies are equally essential, yet they cannot all be done by single groups. It is important for organizations and communities to assess where they have existing strengths, and how those can be expanded to respond to immediate threats and lay the foundation for long-term gains. Second, one of the major challenges in such work is not only repression from autocratic forces, but struggles within groups working for change that lead to a debilitating loss of power rather than constructive critique that enhances our actions. Chenoweth and Marks describe these dangers and how we can engage with difference and ongoing critique in ways that are expansive and constructive.¹⁴ They are also clear about another major point: while the need for action is immediate, it will likely take years to contain the threats of authoritarianism now and return to a stable democratic system.¹⁵

This analysis does not propose a quick fix for American democracy, nor an easy path to reform and renewal for its institutions. But maintaining a longer term mindset is key to building a resilient infrastructure for combatting authoritarianism in the US today and in the future. Over the past 122 years, the most robust and durable democratic transitions were brought about after nonviolent campaigns that lasted a decade or more. This is true of watershed pro-democratic reforms in American history, including the struggles to

¹³ Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks, "Pro-democracy Organizing against Autocracy in the United States: A Strategic Assessment & Recommendations," Faculty Research Working Paper Series, Harvard Kennedy School, October 2022. RWP22-017, p. 2

file:///C:/Users/15738/Downloads/RWP22_017_Chenoweth_Marks%20(2).pdf

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 18-19.

¹⁵ Andrew Higgins, "A Lesson From Poland: Reversing Populist Policies Is Tough," New York Times, November 23, 2024 <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/23/world/europe/poland-law-justice-us-trump.html?searchResultPosition=1>

abolish slavery, to expand citizenship rights, to give women the right to vote, and to extend equal rights to Black Americans, among others.¹⁶

Multiple organizations have released clear calls to action that reflect elements of this overarching strategy. For example, the NRDC (National Resource Defense Council) hosted a webinar on November 14, 2024 where they explained the measures that they are taking now and are preparing to take in the future to protect climate justice, civil rights and democracy.¹⁷

NRDC works to safeguard the earth—its people, its plants and animals, and the natural systems on which all life depends.

NRDC (the Natural Resources Defense Council) combines the power of more than 3 million members and online activists with the expertise of some 700 scientists, lawyers, and other environmental specialists to confront the climate crisis, protect the planet's wildlife and wild places, and to ensure the rights of all people to clean air, clean water, and healthy communities.¹⁸

Essential work to protect the basic functions of democracy and maintain the rule of law is occurring at the state level in the newly formed group, Governors Safeguarding Democracy. GSD is a nonpartisan alliance that is co-chaired by Governor J.B. Pritzker of Illinois and Governor Jared Polis of Colorado.¹⁹

GSD leverages Governors' unique legislative, budgetary, executive, and administrative powers to deliver results, working across states to:

Develop playbooks to enable Governors and their teams to anticipate and swiftly respond to emerging threats,

Reinforce key state institutions to protect executive agencies, elections, state courts, and other core democratic bodies,

Design affirmative strategies to protect the rule of law in the states.²⁰

In addition to concrete actions being taken by alliances and existing organizations, there are specific ways that citizens as individuals can become involved in the protection of democracy and the rule of law. A guide for such work is provided by the voter mobilization group Indivisible. Two of the leaders of Indivisible, Ezra Levin and Leah Greenberg, have written Indivisible: A Practical Guide to Democracy on the Brink, where they acknowledge that many people want to do their part to “protect your family, your neighbors, and democracy” and they

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 30. In this passage, Chenoweth and Marks draw on the works of Ali Kadivar, “Preelection Mobilization and Electoral Outcomes in Authoritarian Regimes.” *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (September 2017): 293–310. Muhammad Ali Kadivar, Popular Politics and the Path to Durable Democracy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022.

¹⁷ NRDC Virtual Conversation: Leading the Green Resistance Against the Trump Agenda November 14, 2024 NRDC President Manish Bapna, Chief Counsel Mitch Bernard, Chief Policy Officer Alexandra Adams.

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https://www.nrdc.org/about?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAiAxea5BhBeEiwAh4t5K08hSuke3kw8DbzBvhUsjiqF92kxIKVHYbDwKqAZcKetzeyRE09-FRoCBKkQAvD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds

¹⁹ <https://govsfordemocracy.org/>

²⁰ Ibid.

provide “a set of strategies and practical first steps” to do just that. In laying out these strategies they also make an important point – we do not yet know all that should be done, and this is a time of experimentation and creativity, working together and learning from our joint efforts.²¹ The strategies that they describe are designed for a “nationwide pro-democracy team,” with people playing different and equally essential roles. This includes creating federal checks on the abuse of power by blocking unjust legislation, working to protect and win elections, both at the local level and at a national level in 2026, and working to protect the democratic transfer of power in 2028. The checks include a “fight to stop Congress from gutting our healthcare or passing a trillion-dollar tax giveaway to billionaires.”²²

There are also specific measures that can be taken by states with solid Democratic governance.

Consider this: there are 15 states with a blue trifecta — California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Washington. That is *nine more trifectas* than we had in 2017. These 15 states represent nearly half of the national gross domestic product and have an outsized level of cultural and economic power. If you live in one of those states, you need to be asking: what is your state doing to leverage that power to stop MAGA’s abuses and harms? Even if you don’t have a unified Democratic government, your governor or AG still has quite a lot of independent authority -- or you might have levers at the city, county, or town level.²³

The Indivisible guide describes ways that democratic states can use their power to “protect people, policies, and progress. From inter-state compacts to maintain policy standards to actions by governors to protect immigrant families from deportation, energized, visionary governance can do a massive amount of real good.” These efforts can do two essential things, “mitigate harm” for people who live in red states, as well as blue states, and “present an alternative story of life under Democratic governance,” making it clear how lives can be “more affordable, safer, and fairer.”²⁴ Greenberg and Levin provide a list of four types of actions that can be taken by governors, attorney generals and state legislatures to immediately protect residents in their states, and state that it is likely that there will be far more in the future:

1. **Sign Executive Orders to Protect Residents:** Democratic governors can issue orders that directly counter federal actions, like establishing protections for immigrants, expanding access to reproductive healthcare, or enforcing strict environmental standards that defy federal rollbacks.
2. **Form Alliances with Other States:** Urge your governor and AG to join regional compacts on issues like climate change, data privacy, and healthcare. These alliances strengthen state policies and create a unified front that makes it harder for Trump’s administration to dismantle progressive gains.
3. **Use their Economic Leverage:** States with significant economic power, like California and New York, can use their influence to counter Trump’s agenda by setting procurement

²¹<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1o1gSdFWIUUpw41O5zbaxedVsr6Xik5XpPd9FwqyXYu40/preview?tab=t.0#> p.1

²² Ibid. pp.11-12.

²³ Ibid.p.14.

²⁴ Ibid. p.15

and contracting standards that prioritize civil rights, environmental responsibility, and fair labor practices. Blue states can refuse to do business with companies that don't uphold progressive values, using their economic might to challenge Trump's policies.

4. **File Lawsuits Against Harmful Federal Actions:** Democratic AGs can use lawsuits to slow down or block federal policies that harm residents or violate constitutional rights. This legal resistance can delay implementation and spotlight the harms of Trump's agenda in the media, building a case for the 2026 elections.²⁵

There is another range of actions that resonates with the call of Chenoweth and Marks for collective protection of those under direct threat. Greenberg and Levin state it is likely that we will see

immediate and devastating attacks on ...immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, women, racial justice advocates, anti-war activists, communities of color, low-income people, and more. They'll double down on their efforts to deprive us of our rights, from abortion bans to mass deportations. Their efforts will be amplified by equally dangerous local and state actors who no longer fear federal government oversight.

This will play out differently depending on your local and state context, but one thing is clear: we will have to keep each other safe. Organizing locally -- in partnership with and across communities under threat -- is often where we'll make the greatest difference. Local community organizing efforts will play a crucial role in building the volunteer and local infrastructure for mutual aid and support for people under threat, from immigrants to women seeking abortions to people who have lost their health insurance.²⁶

In addition to resisting the passage of oppressive state and local legislation, individuals and communities can participate in multiple forms of mutual aid: "working with immigrant rights groups on deportation defense, raising money for, or volunteering with, local actors helping patients access abortions, or supporting your local teachers' union in their fight against a new draconian education policy."²⁷

There is also rigorous long-term work that is being done to foster the practice of deliberative and generative democracy in pre-k-12 education, in higher education in the U.S. and internationally, and for all sectors of society.²⁸ Colleges and universities throughout the United States are taking up the task of fundamentally reshaping civic learning in order to confront the threats to democracy worldwide. For example, in 2022 and 2023, The Karsh Institute at the University of Virginia and the Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition (CLDE Coalition)

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 19

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ See for example the work of the Community-Based Global Learning Collaborative <https://www.cbglcollab.org/>, TESSI (Transformative Engagement for Sustainable Social Impact Institute) <https://www2.lehigh.edu/news/creative-inquiry-launches-tessi-institute-for-academic-innovators-and-social-entrepreneurs>, Civika Asian Development Academy.

presented six forums on just this issue.²⁹ The CLDE Coalition provides a succinct description of their goal, that of “Democracy Engagement:”

Engage students with democracy’s future in a diverse United States, in U.S. communities still struggling to reverse inherited disparities, and in a globally interdependent world where authoritarianism is on the rise.³⁰

On February 6-7, 2023 the forum hosted by the Karsh Institute and the CLDE Coalition was attended by around 233 academic leaders, faculty, staff, presidents and members of governing boards and focused on including all students in ‘high-impact civic learning pathways.’ The purpose of the conference was direct. The greatest threat now to the security of the United States is the decline of democracy. There was also a clear admission that one cause of the decline of democracy is that universities have failed to educate students on how to participate in democratic systems. There is a clear need to add catalytic forms of civic education to college education and to fundamentally transform all of higher education to teach the skills essential to constructive democratic engagement. The conference directly addressed the challenge of “civic and democratic learning for a polarized world” and explored how students could come together to explore the economic, social, environmental and political challenges that we face; the role of democratic institutions in responding to these threats, and the skill sets necessary for inclusive and expansive civic engagement.

To meet this goal, they concluded that there is a clear need for required civics courses that enable students to thoroughly understand the founding documents of the U.S. government and the fundamental processes of democratic governance. To take up the practice of generative democracy requires, however, far more than learning the basics of this history and forms of governance. At the core of generative democracy is the embrace of mutually empowering, catalytic community engagement, collective problem solving based on working with and learning from others.

The goals of the February 2023 conference were far-reaching, and in the fall of 2024, the results of that work were released in the report, *Every Student, Every Degree: College Civic Learning for Today’s Students and Tomorrow’s Democracy*, and were discussed in two conferences on September 4 and October 1.³¹ In chapter five I discuss this work in detail and also explore pre-K-12 forms of education that deliberately foster civic engagement and generative forms of belonging.

At the core of this work is changing the norms of all education to include the skill sets central to generative democracy. This commitment to civic engagement and democratic processes includes working across disciplines to address social concerns, working in teams with diverse groups of students and community members to address social issues and empower local communities in

²⁹ “The Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition (CLDE Coalition) includes education and policy organizations committed to making college students’ civic learning for an engaged democracy a priority across higher education and in public policy. The coalition is led by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, Campus Compact, College Promise, Complete College America, and State Higher Education Executive Officers. The coalition is working in partnership with more than 70 higher education and student success organizations, including several state systems, and all seven institutional accreditors.”
<https://www.collegeciviclearning.org/> (accessed February 6, 2023)

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ <https://www.collegeciviclearning.org/every-student-every-degree>

ways that are socially just and environmentally regenerative. At the heart of this process are the values of interdependence, curiosity, compassion, reason, reciprocity, wonder, delight, and the joy of working with others. The goal is not just individual achievement, but the gift of working with others for a greater good. This a process in which people are invigorated by novelty and change, not threatened by it.

To counter and contain white nationalism and authoritarianism in all their forms, we need such alternative forms of belonging, a self-critical and expansive form of global citizenship that genuinely recognizes and embraces the challenge of seeking the flourishing of all, that forthrightly acknowledges the damage of extractive and exploitative economic and political systems of the past and present, and wholeheartedly welcomes the challenge of learning how to live in reciprocity and responsibility with each other and with the natural world that sustains us.

Ironically, it is just the need for such deep connections that is driving the rise of white nationalism and of other forms of violent extremism throughout the world. In January 2021 the Counter Extremism Project, an international research group that studies terrorism worldwide, released a major study that had been conducted in November 2020 on global extreme right wing movements and what is being done to contain this violence now and prevent its rise in the future. At the core of violent white supremacy is a particular construction of social identity in which to belong is to dominate. The Counter Extremism Project found that for violent extremists, the ‘white race’ is thought to be morally and intellectually superior and its freedom is expressed in domination, exploitation and control of others. They claimed that this threat is ongoing and will likely remain. Ongoing vigilance is therefore essential. They also stated that there are alternative constructions of cultural identity grounded in a commitment to the flourishing of all and an openness to the rigor of self-critical social engagement that can be sustained and supported.³²

Similar conclusions were presented on May 5, 2021 at the 2021 Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development by a panel on Preventing Violent Extremism, jointly organized by the European Union Institute for Security Studies and the Finish Institute of International Affairs. They found that the primary driver of violent extremism of all sorts is not fear, but a need for belonging, for being part of a broader community. They stated that the challenge is not just reacting to such extremism after it occurs, but finding ways to prevent the radicalization of youth by creating more expansive forms of belonging and finding ways of breaking the links between digital platforms and violent extremism.³³

What might it take to provide alternative forms of belonging? The theological educator Dr. Willie James Jennings examines this phenomenon in his book, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*. He describes the construction of whiteness as a form of identity in which what is elevated as the ideal is “white self-sufficient masculinity, defined by possession, control and

³² Marco Macori, David Ibsen, Lara Pham, Hans-Jakob Schindler, Alexander Ritzmann, Kacper Rekawek, Joshua Fisher-Birch, Jean-Yves Camus, Morgan Finnsio, Tommi Kotonen, Graham David Macklin, Shaun McDaid, Fabian Rasem, “Violent Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism – Transnational Connectivity, Definitions, Incidents, Structures and Countermeasures,” *Counter Extremism Project Germany*, November 2020. https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/CEP%20Study_Violent%20Right-Wing%20Extremism%20and%20Terrorism_Nov%202020.pdf

³³ Preventing Violent Extremism: New Entry Points for Collective Action. Expert Roundtable. May 5, 2021. 2021 Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development

mastery.”³⁴ This racial construct has justified the violent exploitation of colonialism and slavery in the past and is justifying the defense and reassertion of such dominance in the present. Jennings calls all of us to a radically different form of being and of community. Rather than the colonial imposition of control and disregard for the social, political, and economic wisdom of Indigenous peoples of Africa, the Americas and Australia, he invites us into the gift of nonknowing – of being genuinely open to learning from and with other peoples.³⁵

Jennings urges us to take up the task of naming the way colonialism failed to see the integrity of others, and then to move ourselves to accountable and resilient forms of learning with and working with other peoples.³⁶ Once freed, oppressors can participate in a deeper reality of engagement with others, what Jennings calls entanglement. Entanglement is the “cultivation of a new sense of shared habitation,” no longer seeking mastery or possession, and instead, genuinely learning from and with others. Jennings states that at the core of this radical entanglement is the “glorious energy of not knowing,” the ability to genuinely listen and learn from others.³⁷ While Jennings grounds his vision in the Christian tradition, I explore how we can learn more about the gifts of entanglement from the wisdom of Engaged Buddhism and this distinctive way of holding hope, suffering, anger and fear, this catalytic way of imagining and engaging in creative political action.

In this book I explore our story as Americans and propose a vision of national power that is rooted in the best of our values and aspirations as well as in the worst of our excesses and brutality. And, far from being utopian, this is a vision that is eminently pragmatic. Remember the etymology of utopia—literally, “no-place.” What follows is a vision of national identity and global responsibility that is emerging from *this* place—from the Hawaiian islands to the mainland to Puerto Rico—and from *this* people—Indigenous Americans and the continuing flow of immigrants, voluntary and involuntary, from Africa, Europe, Latin America, and Asia who make this place their home, their culture, and our nation.

It is a vision that also emerges from our encounters with other places, with other peoples, with other stories. It emerges as we learn from others—others who are not the beneficiaries of Empire, but those who bear its costs. Seeing this vision requires learning from peoples who have different views of community, power, national identity, and global responsibility.

I embrace this vision from the context of one born into a dual identity as oppressor and oppressed. I am a white cisgender woman, born into and shaped by a polis founded on white domination of nature and other peoples, and equally founded on the denial of the full humanity of women of all races. From this dual identity, I know full well the multifaceted power of domination. As Raheb and De La Torre state, “To live in the shadows of Eurocentric empires....the occupied are denied their humanity by the very act of occupation, while the occupiers lose their humanity in the process.”³⁸ This dual reality was also articulated with clarity

³⁴ Willie James Jennings. *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2020, p. 10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

³⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 40-42.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 118.

³⁸ De La Torre and Raheb, p. 1.

and power by Gustavo Gutierrez in his classic text, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*. Gutierrez is a Peruvian Dominican priest and one of the founders of liberation theology. In 1971 he wrote that the theology of liberation frees the oppressed from their marginalization and exploitation and frees the oppressor from their isolation, alienation and arrogance.³⁹ Thus freed, we can work together as global citizens for genuinely mutual flourishing and healing.

Seeing the World through the Eyes of Others

Seeing difference is a learned art—and an essential task. Learning to hear fundamental critiques of our actions and to critically assess alternative views of human community and of ethical and political responsibility is the task of global citizenship and global ethics.

This critique helps us see more clearly both the past and present contours of exploitation and domination. These critiques recover previously neglected historical materials: the critiques of European and Euro-American colonization by Indigenous Peoples. If we pay attention to those voices, what we find is a sharp critique, expressed in incredulous laughter, and in searing pain. While the beliefs and habits of the European and Euro-American conquerors often seemed ludicrous, their cruelty and domination was heartrending and unfathomable. Indigenous peoples of the Americas knew warfare, but they were stunned by the massacres of whole villages by Europeans and by the deliberate mutilation of those who resisted forced labor or conversion.⁴⁰

These voices, historical and contemporary, also express different visions of power, community, and global responsibility. We need differences to see injustices that are fundamental and constitutive of a political, ethical, or religious system. As we listen to these critiques of our interactions with other peoples, as we study histories other than our own, we find that there are compelling ethical and aesthetic alternatives to imperial power.

Generative Democracies

This book is a celebration, an invocation, and an exaltation of the logic that both knows the intoxication of Empire and yet confronts the costs of imperial power. It is a celebration of cultures that have chosen to create expansive and inclusive democratic cultures rather than the heedless or resigned pursuit of imperial domination. It is an invocation of these capacities of heart and mind that enable us to see the costs of Empire, and it celebrates other plays of energy, power, and vitality—the exuberance of other ways of being as peoples and as nations.

Finally, it is a wager. Although he resisted the power of the emerging Third Reich, the renowned twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich wrote that history lives under the star of empire.⁴¹ This

³⁹ Gutierrez book was first published in Spanish in 1971, and I have read the first English version, published in 1973. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books., 1973, p. 275.

⁴⁰ James Wilson, *The Earth Shall Weep: A History of Native America*. New York: Grove Press, 1998.

⁴¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Three Volumes in One*, volume 3, *Life and the Spirit: History and the Kingdom of God*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967, pp.339-42.

book celebrates other stars and invokes, with gratitude and wonder, their continued presence—stars of reverence, of compassion, of virtuosity, honesty, curiosity, and respect. Viable alternatives to imperial power are no less assured than is the inevitability of some form of political, economic, and military domination. Is history under the star of Empire? Can humans live out with creativity the practices of generative democracy? Can we maintain the rule of law *inside* nations and move to the rule of law *between* nations? These questions cannot be answered in advance of the doing. They are wagers to be lived, risks to be taken, not conundrums to be resolved in theory.

One thing, though, is certain. If we as citizens of the United States are to build a generative democracy that counters white nationalism and authoritarianism, this expansive and self-critical political, ethical and economic culture will come from our history, from our stories, and from our open engagement with other peoples, other nations, and other visions of community and power. The mandate for a generative democracy simultaneously emerges from and transforms who we are as individuals, as political activists, as a nation, and as global citizens. Such a mandate reflects and recasts our personal stories of belonging, hope, and fear; it reflects and recasts our deepest ethical and spiritual commitments. Our mandate for a generative democracy emerges from our collective history as citizens of the United States and our collective vision of who we have been and of who we may become as citizens in a global community.

In the following chapters we move from an exploration of personal history and commitment (chapters 1 and 2) to a transformed sense of political activism and inclusive democracy (chapters 3 through 6) and to an alternative geopolitical vision of reckoning, reparations and reciprocity (chapter 7).

Chapter 1 Memory: A Generational Legacy of Honesty, Community Engagement, and Joy

Although I was raised in a tradition that lived political involvement as the expression of faith and ethical commitment, my understanding of spiritually-based political activism was radically challenged by encounters with, and learning from, three other religious traditions: African American Christianity and humanism, Indigenous traditions, and Engaged Buddhism. In this chapter I explore what I have learned from these three traditions, and how those lessons apply to the contemporary challenges of redressing the ongoing costs of colonialist exploitation and the rising threats of authoritarianism.

Chapter 2 The Power and Danger of the Religious: Countering the Logic of Religiously Sanctioned Domination and Cultivating an Open-hearted Immersion in the Wonders of Life

Throughout history, many people have been motivated to work for peace and justice by a profound religious faith. The stories are compelling, and the faiths manifold—Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Indigenous traditions from throughout the world. It is an ongoing gift to learn from these stories of faith, connection, and hope. It is an ongoing challenge to also learn from centuries of religiously sanctioned violence, domination, and hatred. To take seriously the religiously sanctioned exercise of violence and domination leads us to question the relationship between religion and ethics and to reexamine our understanding of the divine, or of spirit, itself.

Chapter 3: Indigenous Forms of Governance: An Inclusive Social Contract and a Communal Ethic of Environmental Responsibility and Justice

In this chapter I explore the work of contemporary Indigenous scholars and activists who are living out a democracy that is deep, inclusive, and creative. Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) claimed that “forces of reconciliation and reparations do indeed exist,” and these forces “continually present us with the opportunity to get involved in the creation of a society more in tune with human needs and highly compatible with the best of Indian and non-Indian beliefs and practices.”⁴² This chapter has been updated to include the current work of Indigenous scholars and activists who explore what tribal sovereignty means in our contemporary world, and how it includes the return of land, food sovereignty and the ongoing work of addressing environmental injustice.

Chapter 4: Indigenous Critiques of Euro-American Colonialism: The Challenge to Move From Evasion and Denial to Responsibility and Respect

Learning from error and abuse is of utmost importance for a just social contract. Indigenous critics, from the time of first contact up to the present, have criticized Euro-American ineptitude, greed, brutality, and denial of culpability. Jace Weaver, for example, criticizes Euro-American absolutism and false innocence, our claims to Manifest Destiny, progress, democracy, and Christian civilization. All too often in American history, the nobility of our ideas as Euro-Americans has kept us from seeing and reckoning with the brutality of our practices: the violent extermination of Indigenous Peoples, the enslavement and forced conversion of African peoples, the violation of treaties and the theft of land, forced removal to inadequate reservations, the cruelties of mission schools, and the outlawing of Indigenous religious practices.⁴³ In this chapter I explore what it means to genuinely understand the impact and meaning of this history of brutal colonial domination.

What practices can enable those of us who are Euro-American to know this history without defensiveness, denial or cynical resignation? We can confront what was done in the past and examine the justifications, rationales, ethical structures, and political policies that allowed those atrocities to occur. We can also examine the ways in which the attitudes, mores, and unwitting assumptions of conquest are part of ongoing economic practices, cultural values, and political systems.

Chapter 5: Indigenous Traditions and the Practices of Generative Democracy

As we strive to respond with integrity, clarity, and creativity to the atrocities and betrayals of the past and present, we do well to follow Vine Deloria Jr.’s injunction. Deloria asks Indigenous Peoples and Euro-Americans to move beyond symbolic politics to real solutions.⁴⁴ Real solutions and specific policies can be developed, not from a position of speaking for others, but

⁴² Vine Deloria Jr., *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr. Reader* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1999), 204-205.

⁴³ Jace Weaver, *Other Words: American Indian Literature, Law, and Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 152

⁴⁴ Deloria, pp. 204-205.

from the practice of generative democracy. What kind of revision of the social contract, of our practices of democratic deliberation, and of all education are necessary to enable us to establish a new American identity? We can learn from Indigenous traditions about the attitudes and commitments that can bring us closer to a just social contract and the practice of generative democracy. We can choose to engage in democratic practices because of our grateful participation in particular communities and particular histories of connection, respect, self-critique, and virtuosity. This work is being taken up throughout the world in educational institutions from pre-k through higher education, and in this chapter I will describe that work in more detail.⁴⁵ I will also describe the work of decolonizing educational and local governmental systems by Civika Asian Development Academy and the work of the Indigenous Values Initiative and the Skä•noñh - Great Law of Peace Center as described by Philip Arnold in *The Urgency of Indigenous Values*.⁴⁶

Chapter 6: The Teachings of Engaged Buddhism: An Ethos of Mindfulness, Compassion and Social Engagement

We can also learn from other ethical and spiritual traditions that systematically develop resilience in the face of suffering, and insight and compassion in the face of social injustice. In this chapter I turn to the work of engaged Buddhists who are critical of the overweening power of the United States and who also live out other forms of individual and national identity and power. While Thich Nhat Hanh was the first to use the phrase *engaged Buddhism*, other examples of work for social transformation based on Buddhist practices can be seen throughout the world. In the first edition I explored the work of Thich Nhat Hanh, Sulak Sivaraksa and Masao Abe. This chapter has been updated to include more recent writings by Thich Nhat Hanh and Sulak Sivaraksa. It has also been revised in light of the current activism and teachings of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists and the work of Black Buddhist teachers and practitioners such as Rima Vesely-Flad who explore the ways in which Buddhism can be reinterpreted in light of Black experience and can serve as a vehicle for Black liberation.⁴⁷

Chapter 7: Reparations: The Ethical Challenges and Opportunities of a Culture of Reckoning, Responsibility and Risk

There is a growing awareness that “the original sin of the Americas is the theft of land and the theft of labor” and the refusal to see the wisdom and dignity of those whose land and labor was stolen.⁴⁸ In this chapter I explore what it means to reckon with these structures of exploitation and domination, and to take up the constructive work of reparations. I will share the elements of reparations as laid out in the work of the United Nations and the National Coalition of Blacks for

⁴⁵ See for example the work of the Community-Based Global Learning Collaborative <https://www.cbglcollab.org/>, TESSI (Transformative Engagement for Sustainable Social Impact Institute) <https://www2.lehigh.edu/news/creative-inquiry-launches-tessi-institute-for-academic-innovators-and-social-entrepreneurs>, and Civic Learning for Democratic Engagement <https://www.collegeciviclearning.org>

⁴⁶ <https://www1.civika.com/home> <https://indigenousvalues.org/> <https://www.skanonhcenter.org/>

⁴⁷ Rima Vesely-Flad, *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition: The Practice of Stillness in the Movement for Liberation* (New York: New York University Press, 2022)

⁴⁸ Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Rehearsal for Living*, Chicago, Illinois, Haymarket Books, 2022.

Reparations in America (N'COBRA) and in the writings of scholars such as Olúfemi O. Táíwò, William A. Darity Jr. and A. Kirsten Mullen.⁴⁹

The work of reparations is complex and multifaceted. In 2005, a U.N. resolution identified five elements of reparations: restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition. In this chapter I focus on cessation and guarantees of non-repetition.”⁵⁰ This requires an acknowledgement of the depth of harm that was done and that is still occurring and taking up the work of decolonization with those who have been and are damaged by imperialism. The work of decolonization is twofold – identifying the cultural, political, educational and economic practices of imperialism, and replacing them with practices of reciprocity, accountability and generative interdependence.

In this chapter I lay out what is being done globally to build communities of generative interdependence to counter rising authoritarianism, to restore regenerative forms of economic life, and to expand generative and deliberative democracies. For example, I describe the work that is being done in the economic sphere to create a culture of democratic belonging that both addresses the threat of extractive and exploitative capitalism and provides an alternative to rising authoritarianism. This is being done by organizations such as Certified Benefit Corporations, People and Planet First, the Social Enterprise World Forum, the Social Enterprise Alliance.⁵¹ I also describe the multifaceted work of reparations that is being done by religious institutions and educational institutions. This includes educational institutions like The Wendland-Cook Program in Religion and Justice at Vanderbilt that focuses on building socially, economically, and environmentally just communities.⁵² I also explore the work of theologians, ethicists, historians, institutions, congregations and activists to fully acknowledge the role of Christianity in the spread of colonialism and imperialism in the past, and the ongoing and increasing threats of white Christian nationalism in the present and future.⁵³

All three exercises—personal, political, and geopolitical—are invitations to see differently the resources of our individual and collective histories and traditions, resources that may enable us to take up the tasks of expansive and just interdependence with honesty, daring, and creativity.

⁴⁹ Olúfemi O. Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), William A. Darity Jr. and A. Kirsten Mullen, *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

⁵⁰ Resolution 60/147, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 16 December 2005, Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/basic-principles-and-guidelines-right-remedy-and-reparation>. See also Kamm Howard, *Laying the Foundation for Local Reparations: A Guide for Providing National Symmetry for Local Reparation Efforts*. July 2020. (Independently published July 30, 2020)

⁵¹ <https://commongoodsolutions.ca/>, <https://www.bcorporation.net/en-us/> <https://sewfonline.com/about/> <https://socialenterprise.us/>

⁵² <https://www.religionandjustice.org/>

⁵³ Here I draw on the work of Joerg Rieger, Carter Heyward, Miguel De La Torre, Kwok Pui Lan, David Gushee, Pamela Cooper-White, Amanda Tyler, Willie James Jennings, Robert Johnson, Anthony Pinn, Michael Hogue, Daniel McKanan, Sofia Bettencourt and others.

