

Research in a Time of Anti-Immigrant Politics: Temporal Rupture and the Limits of Future-Oriented Impact

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Abstract

This essay examines how the current anti-immigrant political climate disrupts the temporal assumptions that organize educational research. Drawing on my experience as an international doctoral student whose dissertation research with refugee children was interrupted by escalating detentions, deportations, and the criminalization of migration, I argue that the political environment does not simply restrict research but ruptures the linear temporality that sustains it. Using Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism, I show how future-oriented research can shape the relation in ways that leave the present conditions of refugee communities largely unaddressed while securing the researcher's own position as ethical and impactful. This does not require giving up hope. Instead, I argue for reconfiguring it, moving away from promises of future transformation toward a practice that remains responsive to what is possible, ethical, and accountable in the present.

"Did you hear A Ph.D. student got deported?"

"Share these resources with the other international students."

"Have you thought about how your research is going to affect the refugee context right now?"

"They were construction workers. They were targeted this time."

"Do you think we are safe?"

"I didn't think it would be us."

"Who do we call first?"

"Do you feel it too?"

"He left for work. He never made it home."

"Have you thought about how your research is going to affect the refugee context right now?" My committee asked me this during my dissertation proposal meeting last year, when I was planning to explore the sonic environments of early childhood classrooms with refugee children. I approach sound as an affective force in early childhood classrooms, asking how the everyday sonic practices of refugee children are entangled with recognition, value, discipline, or exclusion. By then, the political climate had shifted sharply. Detentions, deportations, and the criminalization of migration were reshaping the early childhood contexts and the lives of the children with whom I hoped to work.

I had a clear design, a timeline mapped out. My research felt organized and deliberate. Yet in that conversation, the apparent solidity of my plan trembled. What I had treated as a coherent path suddenly appeared entangled with conditions I could not control. I had not yet been able to name what I had been sensing beneath my careful preparation. When my committee articulated it, I felt something between recognition and dread. Their questions did more than give language to it — they deepened it. They opened further

questions I had not yet allowed myself to ask. We worried together about what this might mean for the families and children who might participate, and for me as an international doctoral student, whose own presence and mobility were shaped by the same political conditions I was trying to study. What becomes of our investment in research as a pathway toward change when the very conditions in which it unfolds are being dismantled?

As a former preschool teacher who worked with refugee and immigrant children in eastern Turkey, I came to this PhD wanting to continue that work. In a recent article (under review), I argued that the political environment should be understood not as a restriction on research but as a friction (Tsing, 2005) that opens new possibilities. This essay pushes that argument further, into the problem of time.

Cruel Optimism and the Fantasy of the Transformed Future

Prior to changes in government policies and heightened aggression against immigrants, I was hopeful that I would find teachers and families that would welcome my presence as a researcher committed to the well-being of immigrant children. While writing my proposal and during discussions with my committee at the proposal meeting, we all recognized that this optimism was inadequate to the current environment. We wondered together what damage might be done by identifying the immigration status of children and their families, making films or photographs, gathering written data, any of which might expose them in unexpected ways.

We also wondered about how my intended research might affect my own safety, as an international doctoral student whose presence and mobility are shaped by immigration regulations and shifting political conditions, conditions that do not stand apart from the research but are entangled with it.

This moment was neither about giving up hope nor simply accepting political conditions as restrictions, but it made me more cautious about how hope is mobilized within research. The current situation functioned as a friction that not only required me to reconsider my planned actions but also unsettled the assumptions embedded in my earlier optimism. I began to question what is put in motion when we imagine research as tied to solutions, impact, and a future in which our work will make a difference.

Berlant's (2011) account of cruel optimism helps me name this attachment. She describes cruel optimism as "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility" (p.20), a condition of holding on to a sustaining fantasy or relation at the very moment its collapse is becoming inevitable. The promise of future transformation is what gives research its continuity in the present. But when that promise no longer corresponds to the conditions in which we work, the attachment becomes cruel. It keeps us moving while blocking the reorientation that the present calls for.

In this way, research risks becoming less a site of relation and more a scene of "projection" (Fabian, 1983). This projection not only substitutes for engagement but also displaces the other from a shared present, positioning them as an object of interpretation rather than a participant in the same time, a move that resonates with Fabian's (1983) critique of the denial of coevalness. It is this projection that allows the researcher to experience herself as capable, ethical, and oriented. What appears as a movement outward is in fact a turning back that reaffirms the subject's own position. As Berlant (2011) suggests through her discussion of apostrophic address, what appears as a reaching toward the other can become a turning back toward the self, producing what she calls a "fake moment of intersubjectivity" (p.22). In my case, this does not take the form of not listening, but of a listening already oriented toward what the work would become. Before entering that meeting, the research was already positioned within a future where the

recordings would be analyzed, written about, made to contribute to broader conversations about inclusion or recognition. The relation was not absent, but it was not held fully in the present either. It had gathered around an affective investment in a better future.

The proposal meeting broke that open. The question did not refine my design. It generated a series of what ifs. What if I did not work with this community at all? What if I moved away from video recording and worked through sketching? What if I changed the camera position, or relied only on audio? What if my presence as an international student shaped what could be shared and recorded, while also limiting how I could act, ask, or position myself within that space? These were not adjustments to a fixed method. Each possibility redefined what could become part of the study, how I could stay with it, and what could be carried forward or left behind. At that point, method, ethics, and ontology were no longer separable (Barad, 2007). The project was being formed through these questions, not modified afterward. And this was not only about their inseparability. It was also a problem of time. The future that had held the project together was losing its force.

It is precisely this difficulty that future-oriented narratives of impact allow us to bypass. Educational research is sustained by a cluster of promises, helping children, influencing policy, and creating more just futures that produce a sense of relationality even when that relation is not fully present. Yet in the current political moment, the conditions that would make this work matter are being dismantled in front of us. At a time when the families and communities I hoped to work with are facing the possibility of incarceration, abuse, deportation, and even death, my hope that making refugee children's lives more visible and valued would contribute over time to better conditions for them is revealed as a fantasy, one that reaches toward future transformation while organizing the relation in ways that leave their present largely unaddressed and secure my own position as a researcher. This tension also resonates with longstanding critiques of neoliberal and instrumental constructions of childhood that defer children's value to a future-oriented logic rather than attending to the existential conditions of the present (Polakow, 1994; Swadener & Polakow, 2011). This does not simply lead to despair. It brings the work into an "impasse" (Berlant, 2011), a thick present in which we continue, improvise, and remain attached to these promises even as they are compromised.

Broken Continuities: Time-Image and Research in the Present

Educational research continues to be organized through a linear, developmental temporality in which we promote the fantasy that a problem is identified, a method is designed, and a future impact is anticipated. As Newkirk (1992) argues, this sequence shapes not only how research is conducted but how it is written and read. Researchers draw on familiar narrative patterns of struggle, transformation, and resolution, patterns that require the story to arrive somewhere better. The present is legible only as a step toward that arrival. This is what Deleuze (1986) calls an action-image, where a situation leads to an action that produces a new and improved situation and time unfolds as measurable progress toward resolution. Such a model allows the present to function mainly as a step toward the future (Leander & Boldt, 2013). Yet the current political conditions interrupt this sequence. The intensification of anti-immigrant policies, the precarity of research with refugee communities, and my own position as an international scholar have broken the continuity between intention, action, and outcome. In Deleuze's (1989) terms, this is a moment in which "the sensory-motor link is broken," (p. 3) and we are no longer able to move forward in a goal-directed way. Time no longer appears as a line of development but as hesitation, exposure, and coexistence, a thick present that cannot be bypassed in the name of future impact.

From this view, research is not the realization of a predesigned trajectory but an event whose direction cannot be fully known in advance. The disruption of my research timeline is therefore not an external obstacle to an otherwise coherent project. It forces me to

recognize that educational processes are already uneven and that the futures we design for them are never secure. The present does not simply lead to the future. It interrupts it.

This temporal rupture is not only theoretical. It has materially reshaped my dissertation. What I once imagined as a stable trajectory, a clearly defined field site, a predictable research timeline, and a coherent methodological plan has become uneven and provisional. Access is uncertain, relationships must be negotiated differently, and the question of whether research is possible at all has become part of the research itself. Rather than moving forward through a sequence of planned stages, the project now proceeds through pauses, hesitations, and reorientations.

The demand to produce solutions, impact, and measurable outcomes presumes a stable time in which problems can be identified, addressed, and overcome. Yet the present conditions of anti-immigrant politics, precarity, and uneven access do not allow for such a linear movement. Rather than marking a failure, this im/possibility opens a different path. It compels research to become responsive to the questions that emerge from within the situation instead of those we planned in advance. Post-qualitative approaches have similarly challenged fixed methods and predetermined trajectories. The responsiveness I describe here shares that onto-epistemological insistence while attending specifically to how political precarity, with its own ethical urgency, breaks the temporal logic research depends on. The problem is not only methodological. It is a crisis in the conditions under which research becomes possible. The political moment does not only limit what research can do; it reorients how research moves. In this impasse, resolution is not simply deferred. It is no longer the horizon that organizes research.

Conclusion

Circling back to my own work, my engagement with sound has been a way of tracing how early childhood classrooms are periodically gathered into recognizable orders such as language, curriculum, and development, and how these orders are unsettled by forces that do not fit developmental or adult view meaning-making. These are not moments outside the system but interruptions from within that make its contingency perceptible. In this essay, I have described how I have come to understand the present political environment in the same way. What appears as an external constraint functions instead as a rupture in the temporal coherence of research itself. The instability I encounter in my project is not different from the pedagogical events I study. It is another instance of how formations that seem continuous are reorganized in the present. My concern has been with these moments of rupture and with how we might learn to attend to them. What this political moment has made clear is that our attachment to future impact as the justification for research is no longer sufficient without remaining and engaging with the conditions of the present in which that research unfolds.

This essay argues that the current political environment does not simply create obstacles for research. It disrupts the linear temporality that organizes research as progress, coherence, and planned transformation. If research time is no longer continuous, if access is uncertain and relations must be negotiated differently, then the insistence on perfectly designed trajectories begins to appear less as rigor and more as a refusal to stay with the situation. The question is not whether our intentions are good, nor whether we still desire to make a difference. The question is why we remain attached to models of research that secure our position as ethical and impactful while allowing us to bypass the risks of being in relation to the communities and conditions that shape the work.

I argue that the temporal rupture is not only a constraint. It is what makes a different form of research thinkable. It redirects the inquiry back onto its own ground: not what to study, but what research does in the present and how it can be conducted without reproducing the relations it seeks to critique. The project, therefore, cannot begin from a predefined

objective or a guaranteed outcome. It must begin from the problem of ethical and political responsiveness to the time in which it unfolds.

This resonates with the conditions through which we are living: the threat of deportation, the atmosphere of surveillance, the instability and militarization of borders, and the ways these forces enter into research itself. What once appeared only as a limitation now marks the reminder that research does not stand apart from these tensions but moves within them. To remain on this ground is not to abandon hope. It is to reconfigure hope as a practice rather than a promise: the capacity to keep asking what-ifs, to keep listening, and to remain accountable in a time when the future can no longer organize the meaning of our work in advance.

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