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Dialogue and Deliberation as Agonistic Resistance: Designing Interactional Processes to Reconstitute Collective Identities

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Abstract

This essay develops a theory of public dialogue and deliberation as agonistic resistance to authoritarian governance.Where authoritarian regimes value strict obedience to authority at the expense of freedom, deliberative democracy is predicated on the decentralization of power and the exercise of personal and political freedoms. As such, practices of dialogue and deliberation stand in direct contradiction to the values of authoritarian governance and hold the potential to constitute collective identities in ways that undermine the very conditions needed for authoritarianism to gain traction. Specifically, this essay argues that authoritarianism flourishes when particular in-group/out-group boundaries can be reified, thereby constituting a clear "us" defined against a threatening "them." However, through the intimate achievement of dialogic and deliberative moments, various social identity roles can be made salient, which can soften group boundaries and help people to feel a sense of immediacy, respect, and connection with those who previously seemed Other.

Author Biography

Anna Wiederhold Wolfe (Ph.D., Ohio University) is an Assistant Professor of Organizational Communication at Texas A&M University. Dr. Wolfe's work examines how individuals use language to create and contest collective identities; how people manage stigmas, emotions, and tensions that isolate them from others; and how processes of dialogue and deliberation build bridges between oppositional stakeholders to facilitate the achievement of deeper understandings and more democratic public decisions. Much of Dr. Wolfe's current work is conducted in collaboration with community partners, especially local governments, to use communication theory in the service of addressing everyday problems of living in a pluralistic society.

Keywords

Dialogue, deliberation, authoritarianism, resistance, nonviolence, collective identity

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Recently, scholars and journalists have sought to explain how political movements, fueled by anger and nationalistic fervor, have brought power to increasing numbers of authoritarian figures in countries around the world. In one such investigation, Arlie Hochschild's (2016) book, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, sought to explain the "deep story" driving the anger of some right-wing groups in the United States through an analogy of waiting in line for the American Dream: as the "rule-followers" watch women, immigrants, refugees, and various minority groups "cut in line" with the aid of federal support systems, their feelings of moral indignation, betrayal, and outrage grow. As political candidates promising strict adherence to laws, protectionist policies of trade and travel, and brash nationalistic pride speak of punishing the "line-cutters," they build upon tribal loyalties (Greene, 2013); and the "rule-followers" feel that they may finally be rewarded for their patience and obedience.

In response to xenophobic cries for mass deportations and the closing of borders to migrants and refugees, as well as the increasing visibility of white supremacist groups, social justice activists have taken to the streets in marches, protests, riots, and acts of civil disobedience to perform their resistance. Anti-fascist groups and Black Bloc anarchists advocate for direct action, at times invoking the threat of violence to fight against groups and institutions that they believe perpetuate injustice or oppression. These activists criticize advocates of dialogue and deliberation as naïve at best and complicit in perpetuating institutional inequalities at worst.

However, this essay argues that public dialogue and deliberation processes might be better understood as a particular form of activism, one that is wholly committed to the principles of nonviolence and especially well-equipped to challenge the deep assumptions and intergroup relationships that allow authoritarianism to flourish. Where authoritarian regimes value strict obedience to authority at the expense of freedom, deliberative democracy is predicated on the decentralization of power and the exercise of personal and political freedoms. As such, practices of dialogue and deliberation stand in direct contradiction to the values of authoritarian governance and hold the potential to constitute collective identities in ways that undermine the very conditions needed for authoritarianism to gain traction.

Specifically, this essay argues that authoritarianism flourishes when particular in-group/out-group boundaries can be reified, thereby constituting a clear "us" defined against a threatening "them." However, through the intimate achievement of

dialogic and deliberative moments, various social identity roles can be made salient, which can soften group boundaries and help people to feel a sense of immediacy, respect, and connection with those who previously seemed Other. Shifts in collective identification need not eliminate intense disagreement from public discourse. Rather, in viewing identity as protean, new opportunities emerge for reconstituting group boundaries, facilitating relations between people, whereby opponents can attend to each other *agonistically*: not as "enemies to be destroyed, but as adversaries to be fought, even fiercely, but whose right to defend those ideas is not to be questioned" (Mouffe, 2013, p. 7).

This essay proceeds in three parts. First, I begin by reviewing activists' critiques of deliberative democracy in order to highlight important distinctions between activism, dialogue, and deliberation. Second, I argue for aligning dialogue and deliberation within a tradition of nonviolent resistance, especially insofar as these forms of talk can challenge authoritarian values and principles. Finally, I discuss interactive processes of collective identity construction in order to emphasize the ways in which dialogic and deliberative moments can undermine authoritarian goals. In so doing, this essay develops a theory of public dialogue and deliberation as agonistic resistance.

Deliberative Democracy and Activism

Deliberative democracy has been subject to critiques on multiple grounds. Among those critiques are concerns about how deliberative processes exclude marginalized voices, exacerbate polarization, and celebrate consensus to a fault. First, normative ideals of deliberation as a rational process of decision-making among equals in the public sphere drew criticisms about the tendency to exclude marginalized and disadvantaged voices and privilege the ideas of those people already over-represented in political decision-making (Fraser, 1990; Sanders, 1997). Even efforts to address these structural inequalities face tension between designing forums to promote equality, which "requires *abstracting from* social circumstances," or to promote equity, which "requires *attending to* social circumstances" (Beauvais & Baechtiger, 2016, p. 1).

In addition to these problems of attending to difference, deliberative democrats have been criticized for promoting processes that merely exacerbate polarized opinion-formation. Cass Sunstein's (2002) research suggested that, motivated by a desire for peer approval, recognition, and acceptance, "members of a deliberating group predictably move toward a more extreme point in the direction indicated by members' predeliberation tendencies" (p. 176). The more like-minded group members are, the more intense the polarization effect will be. However, forum

experiments like Fishkin's Deliberative Polls have demonstrated how design features such as the presence of facilitators, recruitment of diverse viewpoints, and a lack of voting can moderate these effects (Chambers, 2003).

That being said, even if forums are designed to include all stakeholders affected by a particular issue and steps are taken to avoid group polarization, deliberative forums still are subject to critiques about complicity in perpetuating the status quo. To the extent that dialogue and deliberation practitioners and scholars idealize consensus as an outcome of interaction, activists and people in positions of oppression view these processes as insufficient for stimulating the radical changes needed to disrupt existing systems of power. To this point, Iris Marion Young (2001) wrote that the activist "finds laughable the suggestion that he and his comrades should sit down with those whom he criticizes and whose policies he opposes to work out an agreement through reasoned argument they all can accept" (p. 673).

For these reasons, critics of deliberative democracy tend to position deliberation against activism and activism as aligned with nonviolent resistance due to their common interest in taking direct action to oppose injustices. Chenoweth and Cunningham (2013) define nonviolent resistance as "the application of unarmed civilian power . . . without using or threatening physical harm against the opponent" (p. 271). Many forms of direct action, however, can often take violent forms, as we have seen recently with resistance efforts at places like Berkeley and Charlottesville. In contrast, the tradition of nonviolent resistance demands the suppression of aggressive impulses, especially when provoked toward violence. Often misrepresented as synonymous with passive pacifism, nonviolent resistance refers to more than simply the absence of violence. Rooted in *both* the control of physically aggressive impulses and, importantly, the cultivation of compassion, nonviolence in this sense is a particular means of persuasion and political activism (Kurlansky, 2008). In this way, public dialogue and deliberation processes, though lacking in the directness of their action, are by design committed to the principles of nonviolent resistance.

Nonviolent resistance is defined by three key characteristics (Chenoweth & Cunningham, 2013). First, violent or armed action is eschewed for instrumental purposes, rather than merely moral reasons. From this perspective, violence merely perpetuates continuous cycles of violence; addressing deep-seated hostilities demands a disruption to this pattern. Second, nonviolent resistance is purposive, leading to organization, coordination, and/or mobilization of action. Although forums can certainly be organized to different ends (Heierbacher, 2014), a communicational interpretation of dialogic and deliberative interactions assumes,

at minimum, that shared meanings are coordinated (Pearce & Cronen, 1980), and occasionally, collective decisions made and concrete action planned. Finally, nonviolent resistance is transgressive and not sanctioned by governmental institutions. Of course, participating in processes of dialogue and deliberation is not inherently transgressive—indeed, many deliberative events are organized in collaboration with local, state, or national governments—however, it becomes so when contextualized within an authoritarian governance system. As such, this essay seeks to understand these processes as simply one form of nonviolent resistance in a necessarily large toolbox of approaches to oppose the rise of global authoritarianism.

Authoritarianism and Collective Identity

To understand how dialogue and deliberation processes function as a form of resistance to authoritarianism, we must explore the relationships between repressive governance systems and collective identity. Authoritarianism flourishes in circumstances defined by uncertainty, fear, and a heightened awareness of the precariousness of social reality. Authoritarian leaders build on tribal loyalties to reify particular in-group/out-group boundaries, thereby constituting a clear "us" defined against a threatening "them." These authoritarian processes of collective identity-building work to reduce uncertainty among in-group members and institute order. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to conduct an exhaustive analysis of collective identity-building processes in authoritarian public discourse, a brief example from the newest addition to the category of repressive regimes will illustrate the point.

The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index evaluates the state of democracy in 165 independent states and two territories, based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation, and political culture. In the most recent edition, the Democracy Index 2017 reported the worst declines in the health of global democratic systems since the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2010. More than three times as many countries experienced a decline in their total score than recorded an improvement, and 52 countries qualified as authoritarian regimes.

> In these states, state political pluralism is absent or heavily circumscribed. Many countries in this category are outright dictatorships. Some formal institutions of democracy may exist, but these have little substance. Elections, if they do occur, are not free and fair. There is disregard for abuses and infringements of civil liberties. Media are typically state-owned or controlled by groups connected to the ruling regime. There is repression

of criticism of the government and pervasive censorship. There is no independent judiciary. (*The Economist* Intelligence Unit, 2017, p. 64)

Although North Korea and Syria held steady as the lowest-ranking countries on the Democracy Index, 89 countries saw a decline in their score from 2016. Only 19 countries rated high enough across the five categories of analysis to meet the index's definition of "full democracy," and, notably, the United States fell to a "flawed democracy," tied with Italy and ranked one spot lower than South Korea.

Venezuela is the newest member of the "authoritarian" category, as the current government "jailed or disenfranchised leading opposition politicians and violently suppressed opposition protests" (*The Economist* Intelligence Unit, 2017, p. 23). Venezuela's slide toward dictatorship serves as a cautionary tale regarding the relationship between a particular form of populist fervor and authoritarian rule. During his reign as president, Hugo Chávez laid the groundwork for the country's fall from the status of a "hybrid regime" on the Democracy Index.

Propelled into office through the support of populist anger, Chávez "told his supporters that their problems were caused by unresponsive, undemocratic elites and institutions. A strong leader, he argued, was necessary to break through those shadowy forces and impose the will of the people" (Fisher & Taub, 2017, para 14). This polarized construction of collective identity is central to Mudde's (2004) definition of populism as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the… general will of the people" (p. 543).

This definition of populism, however, forgets the movement's history as a democratic tradition and philosophy, and presents it as "a caricature of backward-looking nativism and parochialism" (Boyte, 2011, p. 22). Whereas, Boyte (2011) claims the actual movement is characterized by three key elements: (1) the building of civic agency; (2) the centrality of values of equality, respect for working people and work, inclusion, and participation; and (3) the prioritization of civic education in developing people's public identities, imaginations, and skills. Boyte's brand of "civic populism" is deeply rooted in democratic principles; however, as Venezuela's case demonstrates, populist fervor can pave a path to authoritarianism when an enthusiastic majority consolidates power in the hands of a charismatic leader with the goal of taking power away from institutions.

At the time of Chavez's death in 2013, many key institutions in the balance of executive power had already been dismantled, and Nicolás Maduro's leadership has accelerated the country's turn toward restrictive authoritarianism (Corrales,

2015). Building upon the foundation laid by the previous administration, Maduro has moved the country further away from democratic principles, bolstering support for dictatorial insularity and control by cultivating clear distinctions between a dominant collective "us" identity defined against a threatening "them."

Mutuality and Freedom in Dialogic and Deliberative Moments

As much as authoritarianism thrives among impulses toward insularity, self-protection, clarity, and control, deliberative democracy demands a certain amount of openness, uncertainty, and valuing of freedom for self *and* other. In this section, I describe how the accomplishment of dialogic and deliberative moments depends on conceptions of collective and individual identity that contrast radically with the isolated atomism of authoritarianism. This argument is rooted in an understanding of identities as socially constructed in interaction with others.

Social constructionist approaches posit that subjective human experience comes to be experienced as ossified, objective facts through processes of habitualization, institutionalization, and reification. As people repeatedly enact ritualized role performances, they rely more and more heavily upon these previous iterations as a template for appropriate behavior; or, in more vivid language: "While in theory there may be a hundred ways to go about the project of building a canoe out of matchsticks, habitualization narrows these down to one" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 53). As habitualized behavior passes on from one generation to the next through socialization, the ritual—the habit—becomes institutionalized, at which point the institutions are experienced as external and coercive reality. Reification marks the point in time when the subjective human experience, reiterated, habitualized, institutionalized, becomes so ingrained in society that it is taken to be a fact. According to Berger and Luckmann (1967), "Reification implies that man is capable of forgetting his own authorship of the human world" (p. 89).

Authoritarian regimes thrive on the reification of group boundaries. Generalized groups are formed out of complex collections of individuals and, though there may be a hundred ways to go about organizing these individuals into collectives, the ritualized enforcement of separation between parties contributes to a tendency to dehumanize the "other" as enemies (Northrup, 1989). As a consequence of this distancing and dehumanizing, individuals "are not always – or even usually—oriented toward finding a solution [across their perceived differences]; instead, they may derive important aspects of their identity from being warriors or opponents of their enemy" (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997, p. 70).

In contrast, the accomplishments of dialogic and deliberative moments are contingent upon a bringing together of self and other in experiences of profound mutual awareness. Dialogic moments are characterized by dialogic partners "turning towards" the other, "and both mutually perceiv[ing] the impact of each other's turning. It is a brief interlude of focused awareness and acceptance of otherness and difference that somehow simultaneously transcends the perception of difference itself" (Cissna & Anderson, 1998, p. 74). This experience of *mutuality* "presumes a respect for others that includes confirmation and the willingness not to impose one's beliefs or standards, but does not presume power parity" (Hammond, Anderson, & Cissna, 2003, p. 141). In theorizing the accomplishment of mutuality through storytelling in group deliberations, Black (2008) argues that, during dialogic moments, participants "co-create and manifest their identities in relation to one another and . . . imagine and appreciate each other's perspectives" (pp. 95-96). Implicit in this accomplishment of dialogic moments is a social constructionist assumption about the nature of identity: "identity is constructed, shared, and developed through communication. It is through interacting with others that we create and understand ourselves" (Black, 2008, p. 98). Thus, through processes of identity negotiation and perspective taking, participants identify how they are connected to each other as well as how they are different. Therefore, even in disagreement, people can build common commitment to a public good and understand the reasonableness of a divergent perspective. When participants engage in these disagreements with reason-giving exchanges, they orient themselves not only to each other, but also to the issue. This additional awareness of issue-orientation distinguishes deliberative moments from dialogic moments (Sprain & Black, 2018).

Designing Interactional Processes to Reconstitute Collective Identities

Kadlec and Friedman (2007) draw attention to three crucial challenges faced by "democratic theorists of an activist stripe" with an interest toward designing interactions that address structural inequalities and "the practical realities of power politics" (p. 1). First, they challenge us to think deeply about how to prevent processes of dialogue and deliberation from being contaminated by nondemocratic power relations. Second, they ask event coordinators to consider what elements can be put in place to allow for more open and effective participation. Finally, they task advocates of dialogue and deliberation with demonstrating that these processes can actually relate to meaningful social and political change.

When designing forums as nonviolent resistance, I argue that three key questions emerge from the tensional spaces between Kadlec and Friedman's (2007) challenges. First, the *question of inclusion* asks who should be recruited to attend

(and in what capacity)? This question potentially supports an enclaved design that excludes certain oppressive personalities. With this question, I am not dismissing the possibilities of cultivating deep, valuable conversations with partisans across ideological divides. However, I am emphasizing that respect is both a condition for mutuality (Black, 2008) and an intended social outcome of deliberative processes (Gastil & Black, 2008). Therefore, if someone's ideological position denies the humanity, membership, or freedom of other participants, they cannot possibly meet the basic qualifications to participate. As such, the question of inclusion could easily be retitled the question of exclusion, as all decisions regarding who should be present also implicitly identify who should be absent.

Second, the *question of participation* demands that organizers consider what techniques or rituals will stimulate engagement, sharing, listening, and mutual consideration among those present? This question asks how event organizers, facilitators, and/or other attendees can create opportunities for achieving mutuality in interaction. Finally, the *question of impact* asks how we can ensure that these interactions influence perceptions of and (practices toward) self, other, and issue during and beyond a planned forum? The answers to these questions may lead us to conclude that in practice, the mutuality that defines dialogic and deliberative moments is unlikely to be achieved in the context of nonviolent resistance to authoritarianism unless strategic design decisions are made that challenge oft-criticized normative ideals of the rational, deliberative public sphere.

Although the structuring of interactions in particular ways does not guarantee the accomplishment of dialogic or deliberative interaction, and "we can never just assume that deliberative processes actually work as designed" (Sprain, Carcasson, & Merolla, 2014, p. 152), conceiving of interaction as a designable object raises valuable questions about how to create conditions that make likely or possible idealized forms of communication (Aakhus, 2007). The practical question, in the context of this essay, is how do we design processes to make likely or possible dialogic and deliberative moments across perceptions of difference? I am not so naïve to think that conceptions of self are likely to be radically re-worked through an evening of thoughtful conversation alone. However, the accomplishment of mutuality in dialogic and deliberative moments provides opportunities for reciprocal recognition between participants, which directly challenges authoritarianism's insular, atomistic conceptions of collective identity fueling hostile inter-group relations.

In these spontaneous moments of profound awareness of self and other (and issue), invisible social identities—which may not be readily apparent to a stranger but inform our ways of seeing and being in the world—can be materialized through

talk. When important aspects of the self (upbringing, significant life choices, family connections, political or religious beliefs, illnesses or injuries, talents or skills) are not immediately visible in one's appearance, people must choose whether or not to disclose these aspects of the self in interaction with others. Claire, Beatty, and Maclean (2005), in their investigation of invisible differences in the workplace, found that people "reveal more readily to a target who seems knowledgeable about, sympathetic toward, or similar to oneself because he or she also shares the invisible difference" (p. 86). Disclosure of invisible differences exposes a person to the vulnerability of rejection or social judgment, but also heightens perceptions of intimacy between parties and presents opportunities for connection and the provision of social support (Wolfe, Blithe, & Mohr, 2018). In this way, the accomplishment of mutuality in dialogic and deliberative moments facilitates connections across previously hidden social identities, materializing opportunities for new constructions of collectivity.

Importantly, mutuality assumes the persistence of difference; it is not an experience of collapsing into the Other, but a positioning in agonistic relation to an Other. In contrast to deliberative theories that idealize common ground and consensus, agonistic perspectives value the productive role of tension, struggle, contention, and conflict in multivocal interactions (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012). We are all members of multiple social groups at any given time, these groups have fluctuating and permeable boundaries, we occupy various and changing roles in relation to others, and as such, the collective identities we claim shift and change in response to contextual factors of time, place, and relations to others (Putnam & Stohl, 1990). Recognizing the multiplicity and fluidity of identities, Lifton (1993) uses a metaphor of *the protean self* to describe irreconcilable and productive tension between seeking stability and change: "The protean self seeks to be both fluid and grounded, however tenuous that combination . . . Proteanism, then, is a balancing act between responsive shapeshifting, on the one hand, and efforts to consolidate and cohere, on the other" (p. 9).

A protean view of identity rejects the rigidification of group boundaries and is consistent with conceptions of mutuality, achieved in dialogic and deliberative moments, as emergent opportunities for facilitating relations between people. Models of dialogue, deliberation, and agonistic pluralism share common assumptions about the coexistence of difference and respect. The assumed value of multivocality in these interactions has implications for design, as certain conditions must exist for engaging in each of these processes: (1) all participants must agree on the general purpose and rules for interaction; (2) all participants must be willing to deeply examine and discuss their own positions; (3) all participants must honor the legitimacy of their opponents' right to deeply examine and discuss their

positions; and (4) all participants must listen with curiosity and strain for understanding. To the extent that dialogic and deliberative moments facilitate connections across profound differences, these forms of talk can function as nonviolent resistance to the deep structures supporting authoritarianism.

Conclusion

Fung (2005) argued that conditions of structural inequality at times justify the adoption of coercive force in order to bring unwilling parties to the deliberative table or to otherwise create fair and inclusive conditions for deliberation. Deliberative activism, I argue, gains its power as a distinct form of resistance insofar as it remains committed to principles of nonviolence. After all, "a conflict between a violent and a nonviolent force is a moral argument. The lesson is that if the nonviolent side can be led to violence, they have lost the argument and they are destroyed" (Kurlansky, 2008, p. 49). Though far less direct than protests, marches, sit-ins, demonstrations, boycotts, riots, strikes, or street theater, the cultivation of dialogic and deliberative moments seeks to end the perpetuation of cycles of hostility and violence by addressing deep structures of relational differences that make possible the dehumanization of outgroup members. Because of the long-term investment of this approach, this argument is aligned with Levine and Nierras (2007) suggestion that these interactional processes be understood "as part of a repertoire of democratic approaches, appropriate for some circumstances but not others" (p. 1). Specifically, these processes are well-equipped to disrupt the conditions necessary for authoritarian rule.

In sum, this essay has argued that the reification of "us" versus "them" binaries and the rigidification of narrow conceptions of in-groups and out-groups cultivates conditions in which authoritarianism can flourish. Through the construction of an enemy "other" who threatens the security and prosperity of the idealized collective, authoritarian regimes gain support for their promises to reinstate order, control, and clear boundaries. To the extent that dialogic and deliberative moments foster the disruption and reorganization of rigid group boundaries, processes that make likely or possible these types of interactional accomplishments function as resistance to the very preconditions of antagonism underlying authoritarianism. As less immediately apparent social identity roles are materialized through talk, participants can experience connection with those who previously seemed Other.

The claims forwarded in this essay are ripe for further empirical investigation. Previous research (Black, 2008; Sprain & Black, 2018) has highlighted the ways in which interactional processes such as storytelling, reason-giving marked by disagreement, and respect and listening contribute to the accomplishment of

profound awareness of self in *relation* to "other" (and to "issue" in the case of deliberative moments). In these dialogic and deliberative moments, invisible social identities can be made visible through talk, and these disclosures have the power to disrupt the rigidity of in-group/out-group boundaries, softening the membrane between conceptions of self and Other so that different relational connections can be entertained, if even briefly.

Questions regarding the duration and impact of these perspective-shifting moments offer rich avenues for additional research. How might prolonged engagement in processes of dialogue and deliberation influence the complexity of recurring participants' self-concept, as they make salient a wide range of social identities and/or are exposed to various categories of difference? To what extent does participating in processes of perspective-taking and identity negotiation influence interactions outside of the space and time of a forum? If future research demonstrates prosocial impacts of this line of inquiry—that a more protean conception of self in relation to other decreases instances of discrimination against outgroups, that it promotes greater levels of perspective-taking due to increased fluidity between identity categories—how might we embed processes of dialogue and deliberation into organizations and communities fraught with moral conflicts?

When Arlie Hochschild (2016) reflected on the dynamics driving the growing divisions in the United States, she came to the conclusion that our polarization is rooted in a distance between self and other marked by what she describes as an *empathy wall*: "An empathy wall is an obstacle to deep understanding of another person, one that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose childhood is rooted in different experiences" (p. 5). Authoritarian regimes thrive when this indifference and hostility to others supports the establishment of sectarian policies, promoting the interests of a small sub-set of society as the common good and demonizing difference as a threat to security and prosperity. To the extent that deliberative democracy calls for the bringing together of difference, the agonistic struggle for mutuality, and the permeability of boundaries between collective identities, the achievement of dialogic and deliberative moments can function as powerful instances of organized resistance.

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