The *Social Justice Turn*: Cultivating "Critical Hope" in an Age of Despair

Kari M. Grain
University of British Columbia

Darren E. Lund
University of Calgary

Recent global headlines about suicide attacks, xenophobic rhetoric, systemic gun violence, and the continued displacement of those fleeing civil war and environmental catastrophe have foregrounded social justice issues pertaining to race, nationality, socioeconomic status, religion, and a host of other factors. We suggest in this paper that the pervasive despair of our current historical moment has necessitated the urgent development of the conceptual "Social Justice Turn" in service-learning. This move uses as a foundational starting point three trends that have been consistently marginalized but are gaining momentum in our field: a) critique of the field's roots in charity; b) a problematization of White normativity, paired with the bolstering of diverse voices and perspectives, and c) the embrace of emotional elements including tension, ambiguity, and discomfort. Finally, we offer "critical hope" (Bozalek, Carolissen, Liebowitz, & Boler, 2014; Freire, 2007) as a conceptual space in which service-learning as a field may simultaneously acknowledge the historical and contextual roots of current despair, while using this affective element as a pedagogical and curricular means to engage service-learning more intentionally as a vehicle for social justice goals.

It was grounds for despair. On September 2nd, 2015, a three-year-old Syrian boy named Alan Kurdi washed ashore on a Mediterranean beach. The drowning was not an unusual occurrence in the region, as news articles and witness reports had many times made second-page international headlines, warning of the exodus out of Syria, and calling alarm to the deplorable conditions of human trafficking boats. What made Alan's story front-page news, however, was the graphic imagery that quickly invoked in citizens around the world an emotional connection to this victim of civil war and structural inequality. Alan, one child of thousands lost to a circumstance positioned firmly in a larger web of structural restrictions and political conflict, became every person's child in the global imaginary. Countless public figures saw in Alan a child they knew and loved; former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper recalled the moment he and his wife saw the photo, and it evoked memories of their own son at that age (The Canadian Press, 2015). Social media forums erupted with the hashtag #Alankurdi, mourning his death and the circumstances leading up to it, forming support groups for Syrian refugees, and organizing protests. The notorious photograph rendered the Syrian conflict and its consequences more than a distant political story; for many, Alan became an intimate personification of a civil war, and the face that ignited ethical debates about – among other things – who is granted the privilege of mobility, who has the power to patrol borders, what it means to work for social justice, and to what degree each individual, organization, and government is responsible for taking action when humans suffer.

These questions, catalyzed by the death of a child, became the *raison d'etre* of this article. In tandem with the hateful rhetoric of far right parties in Europe and elsewhere, and popularized xenophobic responses to the global refugee crisis, the death of Alan Kurdi implored us to ask what the field of service-learning and community engagement can and ought to do in light of this emotionally charged, highly divisive historical moment. Service-learning is ideally positioned to put a human face to issues of inequality and human suffering; notions of mobility, power, privilege, and responsibility are especially vital to this field in a time when the global events of 2015 and 2016 have caused a heightened sense of urgency and a widening political divisiveness between constructed binaries of black and white, migrant and refugee, police officer and citizen, right and left politics, Republican and Democrat, and more broadly, "us and them." High profile suicide attacks in Lahore, Brussels, Ougadougou, and Nice (to name only a few), escalating racialized police brutality, mass gun violence, the polarizing rhetoric of political campaigns here and abroad, and the rising rate of political and environmental refugees, have all profoundly shifted the landscape in which service-learning in higher education operates, and therefore must influence how we respond

as educators, scholars, practitioners, and citizens within a field that continually navigates border crossings of all sorts.

It bears accentuating that the challenging nature of our current historical moment is not presented here as a devaluation of the struggles that marginalized communities have faced for many generations. In fact, although the current political climate seems new partly because it has only recently gained momentum within popular media, issues of racism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, misogyny, colonialism, exploitation, and oppression have been unrelenting for many years. Current injustices underlined by stories such as Alan Kurdi's, in other words, are far from new, but rather have been in continuous development, each issue of injustice gaining quiet momentum until a photo, a video, or a story finally grips the attention of mainstream media and a broader public. This recent shift – one of increased attention and intensity – demands that educators, practitioners, and institutions take stock; we argue that this has necessitated an organized, conceptual turn in higher education service-learning – one that is acutely aware of and responsive to inequality and dangerous rhetoric, and one that actively problematizes its own roots and blind spots.

With this increased attention to injustice in mind, we suggest in this paper that a *social justice turn* has (only just) begun in the field of service-learning, led by critical scholars and pedagogues; if developed intentionally and robustly, this turn will keep the field relevant amid the divisive politics of our current times. Without the social justice turn and its continued bolstering, service-learning, steeped in a history of White[1] normativity and charity, risks becoming an outdated pedagogy; it could simply lapse into an approach that inadvertently exacerbates intolerance, leaves the heavy lifting to marginalized activists, and omits criticality in favor of naïve hope. This naïve hope, as Freire (2007) forecasts, leads only to despair because it lacks a foundation of political struggle:

> Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without the struggle, hope, as an ontological need, dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness. And hopelessness can become tragic despair. Hence the need for a kind of education in hope. (p. 3)

Service-learning is thus poised, via the social justice turn*,* as a pedagogy that encounters injustice and divisiveness as it occurs in local and global communities, and using as a catalyst these disheartening and enraging events that could comprise grounds for despair, instead fuels itself to engage in political action toward social and economic justice.

In this paper we provide a working definition of our understanding of social justice situated within a critical conceptual framework, and outline research in which critical pedagogues and scholars have taken up related concerns within community engagement and service-learning literature. By enacting a social justice approach, service-learning has the potential to empower communities, resist and disrupt oppressive power structures, and work for solidarity with host and partner communities. Although themes related to power and privilege are far from new in service-learning, we suggest an immediate need for a shift from their marginalized position to a more central focus, thereby laying a foundation for an emergent social justice turn. In particular, we highlight three areas that signify a conceptual transformation in the field of service-learning that has already begun to take place in its earliest form: (a) the problematization of charity and salvationism; (b) a critique of White normativity paired with the burgeoning diversification of authors and perspectives; and (c) a pedagogical and curricular embrace of emotions – especially those related to tension, ambiguity, and discomfort. Finally, we offer "critical hope" (Bozalek, Carolissen, Liebowitz, & Boler, 2014; Freire, 2007) as a concept that can assist the service-learning field in moving through/ working with the despair and cynicism that seems to have intensified in light of recent events.

Theoretical Framework

Using a theoretical framework inspired by critical social justice pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Kumashiro, 2009; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012) and critical race feminism (Bannerji, 2000; hooks, 2003; Razack, 1998), we outline social justice service-learning scholarship that has pushed the field toward this conceptual turn, describe the key tenets of the proposed transition that have already begun to take place, and suggest further developments that our field must consciously enhance if it is to remain relevant in a politically divided global atmosphere. We acknowledge that higher education institutions perpetuate inequality through hegemony, patriarchy, classism, and White normativity (Bannerji, 2000; hooks, 2003; Razack, 1998), all of which must be countered by higher education service-learning practices and scholarship (Verjee, 2012). Central to the extension of the social justice turn, we advocate for a continued diversification of voices in the field, and adopt a firm anti-oppressive stance toward the hate speech highlighted by outspoken politicians and social media groups. We offer the notion of "critical hope" (Bozalek et al.,

2014; Freire, 2007) as a helpful tool for thinking about and moving through some of the "difficult knowledge" (Britzman, 1998) that service-learning participants (community partners, students, faculty, and staff) often encounter. When inequality is foregrounded in service-learning programs and in the broader society in which they are situated, it is these "pedagogies of crisis," as Kumashiro (2009) describes them, with which service-learning participants and affected communities must grapple.

Literature Review: Evidence of a Social Justice Turn in Service-Learning

The discussion of social justice is not new in the field of service-learning, as practitioners and scholars in the past decade or so have called for "justice-learning" (Butin, 2007), "a pedagogy of interruption" (Bruce, 2013), "critical service-learning" (Mitchell, 2008), "social justice sense-making" (Mitchell, 2013), and "antifoundational service-learning" (Butin), among others. Some volumes have focused on the intersection of social justice and service-learning (e.g., Calderon, 2007; Cipolle, 2010; Tinkler, Tinkler, Jagla, & Strait, 2016) and various publications have pointed to the goal of using this approach as a project in the development of a citizens oriented in, expressing commitment to, and highly valuing social justice (Battistoni, 2002; Mitchell).

Unfortunately, the term "social justice" is sometimes used loosely to describe programs and approaches that – behind the label – are not foundationally premised on social justice at all. Therefore, our discussion of a social justice turn will be preceded by a working definition of social justice as we understand it. Beyond a general idea, what exactly does this term mean in the context of engaging collaboratively with community, and how can it encapsulate more than just an emblem for those issues of fairness that we claim to be important to service-learning? Too often, the notion is used vaguely, and with little analysis of its meaning, roots, and the myriad ways it is taken up. While social justice carries a rich academic and grassroots history, and has prompted innumerable debates, we define it following the tenets set forth by Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012), who refer to "specific theoretical perspectives that recognize that society is stratified (i.e., divided and unequal) in significant and far-reaching ways along social group lines that include race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability" (p. xviii). Working against social injustice means adhering to the following commitments:

> recognizing that relations of unequal social power are constantly being enacted at both the micro (individual) and macro (structural) level, understand our own positions within these relations of unequal power, think critically about knowledge, and act on all of the above in service of a more socially just society. (p. xix)

Drawing on the emancipatory work of Freire (2007/1994), we see social justice goals as encompassing a struggle to equalize unequal power relations and call into question hegemonic assumptions and processes. By our conception, social justice requires a strong sense of humility in facing the unknown and the uncertain as well as a willingness to listen to those with whom we collaborate toward common goals. Service-learning as social justice often draws on the work of anti-racist, participatory action research, critical pedagogy, and feminist scholars to examine and resist political, economic, and social inequities that permeate educational institutions and broader society (e.g., Freire, 1970, 1973; Gorski, Zenkov, Osei-Kofi, & Sapp, 2012; hooks, 2003; Kumashiro, 2009; Rosenberger, 2000). In our conceptualization of social justice, we also recognize that the very act of generating a definition can exclude multiple perspectives and render some voices unheard. Therefore, borrowing from Bruce (2013), we position the "relational" element of service-learning also as a characteristic of our form of social justice. In other words, while we see the importance of explicitly discussing the theoretical foundations and assumptions of the term in question, we also consider "social justice" open to transformation based on varying contexts and different lived experiences of (in)justice(s). This will be discussed in greater detail when we delve into the role of ambiguity and discomfort in the social justice turn. While the above topics imbricated in social justice are not new to the literature, there has been a recent proliferation of research that deals with them. With the staggering variability of programs organized under the banner of service-learning, it is unsurprising that the field may be critiqued for its capacity to reify harmful stereotypes, reproduce racism, and reinscribe the exhausted First- versus Third-World dichotomy, while promoting in mainly privileged university students a self-congratulatory sense of having altruistically helped those in need (Cipolle, 2010; Diprose, 2012; Grusky, 2000; Purpel, 1999; Vaccaro, 2009). Other critiques outline concerns over the community impact and exploitation (Butin, 2003, 2010; Cipolle, 2010), emotional voyeurism (Bowdon & Scott, 2002; Butin, 2006; Langstraat & Bowdon, 2011; Purpel, 1999), and the inaccessibility of the pedagogy for marginalized students (Butin, 2006; Verjee & Butterwick, 2014), among others. As Einfeld and Collins (2008) illustrate through their research with an AmeriCorps service-learning

program, the exposure to inequality and the development of relationships with marginalized or underprivileged communities does not necessarily lead students to a desire for social change. Many of the scholarly voices deeply critical of service-learning, however, are the same ones that point to its potential as a highly effective, emotional, and transformational pedagogy that serves community needs while also teaching students about diversity, power and privilege, social justice, responsibility, civic mindedness, global citizenship, and more (e.g., Catlett & Proweller, 2016; Cipolle, 2010; Grusky, 2000; Hartman & Kiely, 2014; Kiely, 2004; Kraft & Dwyer, 2000; Lund, Bragg, Kaipainen, & Lee, 2014; Lund & Lee, 2015; Schensul & Berg, 2004; Sharpe & Dear, 2013). Herein lies the greatest dilemma within the field of service-learning: It has the capacity to exacerbate inequality when done poorly, and to be a promising equalizing force when done well. Its effectiveness in advancing the goals of social justice, rather than causing harm, we argue, is contingent upon a conscious shift in the conceptualization of service-learning – the social justice turn–one that has already begun in three particular areas.

Critiquing Charity and Salvationism

The first and most notable sign of a social justice turn can be observed in the popularization of a critique of charity and salvationism. According to Bruce (2013), a charity approach to service-learning involves the troubling notion that we, as a group – typically learners, volunteers, students, and faculty – have something that that they, as a distant, other group – of marginalized, impoverished, or "at-risk" people – do not have, and so we aim to help them. This deficit-model thinking reinscribes students and institutions as privileged and powerful, and recipient communities as lacking, thereby perpetuating a server-served dichotomy (Bruce, 2013; Cipolle, 2010). Several publications contain warnings, preambles, and problematizations of a charity-based approach to service-learning – and in fact, it has become unusual to *omit* this vital issue in any major volume or publication in the field (e.g., Bringle & Hatcher, 2011; Calderon, 2007; Cipolle, 2010; Gorski et al., 2012; Johnson, 2014; Morton, 1995; Nieto, 2000; Oden & Casey, 2007). While various scholars differ in their suggestion for *where exactly* the field should move, the resounding consensus seems to be oriented in a direction away from charity and salvationism, and toward, to some extent, an examination of power and privilege (e.g., Hartman & Kiely, 2014). Recent advances in service-learning on a global level, for example, cite the fact that international service-learning (ISL) is too narrow in

its conception of crossing borders (Hartman & Kiely, 2014). Instead, Hartman and Kiely propose that "global service-learning" (GSL) is a "community-driven service experience" that examines power relations, inequality, and a broad set of global issues through critically reflective practice (p. 60).

In yet another example, the foreword to O'Grady's (2000) edited volume on service-learning and multiculturalism contains the following statement: "This book challenges the perception of community service as charity, replacing it with the notion of civic responsibility in a pluralistic but unequal society" (Nieto, 2000, p. ix). While Morton (1995) offers three models of service, including charity, project, and social change, each with its own strengths, he suggests that the social change model particularly offers great potential for societal transformation. Others call assertively for a transition from charity approaches to a "social change" model that was taken up by the Black Panther Party in the 1960s and 1970s (Oden & Casey, 2007). Kajner, Chovanec, Underwood, and Mian (2013) share research that highlights the use of critical pedagogy frameworks to support students in activist community placements, while Lewis (2004) outlines the complexities of her own college's attempted transition from a charity-based approach – described as a consensus perspective of society – toward a social justice approach. This apparent bifurcation of aims is also reflected in Mitchell's (2008) influential article, which distinguishes between traditional and critical approaches, the former of which underscores service and student learning without due emphasis on structural inequality, and the latter of which focuses on – and takes action against – structural and institutionalized injustice.

While charity and salvationism are frequently problematized in the literature, global citizenship, as an oft-cited central goal of service-learning, is critiqued for its implicit goal of helping the needy Other (Jefferess, 2008). In his sharp critique of modern theorizations of global citizenship, Jefferess frames global citizenship rhetoric as a form of modern day imperialism, contending that,

> the form of imperialism has changed: race discourse and the language of inferiority and dependence have been replaced by that of culture talk, nation-building, and global citizenship. The notion of aid, responsibility, and poverty-alleviation retain the Other as an object of benevolence. The global citizen is somehow naturally endowed with the ability and inclination to 'help' the Other. (p. 28)

This inclination, he claims, is rooted in a sense of pity, and so it follows that service-learning as

a pedagogy that invokes global citizenship may be critiqued as such. This helping narrative is further problematized by claims that it invokes a new form of imperialism and colonialism, wherein good intentions only function to reiterate a striking power differential: "Many acts of helping within service learning projects . . . may in fact be acts of complicity in the reproduction of structural and cultural inequalities" (Bruce, 2013, p. 36). The term "service" in fact has been contested for its negative connotations to the extent that Maas-Weigert (1998) suggested dropping it altogether and instead using the term "community based learning" to underline reciprocity and community relationships. This popularized critique of service-learning – that, despite its best intentions, it has the capacity to do harm through its focus on "helping" or "serving" the broken Other – is a promising indication that the social justice turn is ripe to take place in the field.

The commitment to an ongoing problematization of structural inequality and charity-based notions of service-learning, while a key tenet of the social justice turn, does not come without its complexities and pitfalls; an underlying desire for innocence can subtly manifest as a key driving factor in social justice work. Drawing on the work of Stein (2016) and Tuck and Yang (2012), we can develop an awareness of our "moves to innocence," which can be described as "those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all" (p. 10). Thus, while a subversion of charity approaches to service-learning are key to the development of the social justice turn, the critique itself is not enough; in fact, Stein (2016) cautions against the use of "critique as self-immunization," whereby "we may position ourselves as outside of critique or complicity" (p. 18). She suggests instead, an awareness of our habitual moves to innocence, an approach infused with humility, and "a commitment to sit with, listen to, learn from, and even be undone by the discomfort of knowing that even as we seek to dismantle structures of capture and containment, we remain answerable for our differential complicity within them" (p. 20). In other words, even in our quest to "do the right thing," we cannot distance ourselves from the complexity of our identity and positioning within constellations of structural inequality.

Critiquing White Normativity and Bolstering Diversity

Keeping complexity in mind, we shift our attention to a second indication of a nascent conceptual and practical shift in our field: the problematization of both entrenched White normativity and the underrepresentation of diverse voices. This awareness has resulted in not only the development of an important critique, but also a budding profusion of diverse topics and voices that present insights into issues of race, gender, ability, nationality, religion, culture, and many others. This section offers examples of literature that critique White normativity and proffer counter-narratives from diverse voices, people, and communities.

McIntosh (1989) wrote that White normativity is developed through a privileging of "White" knowledge and behavior as somehow neutral and ideal. ISL in particular has been problematized for its tendency to cater to White, middle- to upper-class students (Green, 2003; Mitchell, Donahue, & Young-Law, 2012; York, 2016). As Butin (2006) reminds us in his summary of the limits of service-learning in higher education, "service-learning may ultimately come to be viewed as the 'Whitest of the White' enclave of postsecondary education" (p. 482). Building on this, Mitchell, Donahue, and Young-Law (2012) caution us that done poorly, this approach may become merely a "pedagogy of Whiteness," wherein programs embody "strategies of instruction that consciously or unconsciously reinforce norms and privileges developed by, and for the benefit of, white people" (p. 613). Consequently, as Butin (2006) points out, institutions and pedagogues sometimes make overarching assumptions that their service-learning students do indeed fit the normative identity described as "White, sheltered, middle-class, single," thereby running the risk of further catering to a privileged group while also failing to acknowledge the shifting demographics toward more diverse higher education student bodies (p. 481).

Extending this line of inquiry, Bocci (2015) examines service-learning texts and the construction of historical narratives in the field to expose ways in which White normativity is expressed through both an overrepresentation of White voices (e.g., leaders, scholars, practitioners, and students) and a dominance of White narratives, histories, and ways of knowing. Her analysis illustrates how the field's scholarship emphasizes the White conceptual roots of service-learning by highlighting White, Anglo founding theorists such as John Dewey and William James, while downplaying non-Anglo thinkers such as Paulo Freire, W. E. B. DuBois, and Alain Locke. A continuing history of White normativity and dominance is a key issue that critical pedagogues and scholars have begun to problematize in service-learning. Further, the urgency of this dialogue is made more salient with the si-

lencing and marginalization of non-White voices, non-hegemonic perspectives, and bolstered by divisive global events of recent years that exacerbate the marginalization of vulnerable groups of people.

It bears stressing here that we write this article as White scholars in a field and academic culture that continues to be dominated at the institutional and societal level by White voices (see Lund & Carr, 2015). No social justice turn in service-learning can develop without highlighting this problematic reality, examining our own complicity in such inequality, and working to change it at a structural level. One way to do this is to draw on Butin's (2005) assertion that the unit of analysis should not be service-learning programs themselves but rather the institutions in which they operate and by which they are constrained. Furthermore, our field can benefit from observing and asking questions of other fields and disciplines that have found success in their diversity and inclusion of many voices and multiple ways of knowing. Significantly, we can learn much from listening to the voices of those who choose *not* to engage in the field of service-learning for some of the reasons noted above.

Fortunately, the profusion of voices and perspectives in service-learning scholarship – while it still has a long way to go – is beginning to offer counter-narratives and important considerations for the progressive development of the field. Through her service-learning counter-storytelling research with women of color at the University of British Columbia, Verjee (2012) proposes "a transformative vision of service-learning engagement" which calls for institutional accountability and critical examination of hegemony as a prerequisite for genuine, mutually beneficial relationships with the community. Donahue and Luber (2015) highlight the heteronormative nature of traditional service-learning, calling for the "queering of service-learning." They suggest that approaching community engagement work through the lens of queer theory and with attention paid to LGBT issues may trouble normative assumptions and lead students to unlearn binary thinking, often leading to moments of "crisis" as described by Kumashiro's (2002) pedagogy of crisis. Furthermore, drawing on her extensive experience in community engagement and social justice work, Mitchell (2015) continues to push the field toward more critically reflective engagement with diverse students, staff, and communities; her work resonates with many, and she recently received a standing ovation for her keynote panel presentation at the 2015 IARSLCE conference in Boston. The examples above highlight a small portion of the myriad efforts being put forth by practitioners and scholars to present alternative narratives that enrich a rapidly diversifying field. This paper positions the profusion of these voices – and the many unheard people who work to engage marginalized and disempowered communities daily – as foundational to the social justice turn.

Embracing Emotion: Tension, Ambiguity, and Discomfort

A third change that evidences the birth of the social justice turn can be observed in the recent pedagogical and curricular embrace of critical emotion studies (e.g., Langstraat & Bowden, 2011) and the focus on tension, ambiguity, and discomfort. There is little doubt that service-learning has the capacity to be an emotional journey in which participants, including students, community partners, host communities, faculty, staff, and others, may encounter varying types of difference and are necessarily put in a position to question their own ontologies, ethics, and ways of knowing. This is reflected in service-learning's effectiveness as a transformative pedagogy rooted in Kolb's (1984) notions of experience, action, and reflection. Transformation and questions of identity and being, however, can entail great discomfort, ambiguity, and tension – all of which are becoming increasingly embraced by practitioners and pedagogues in the early days of the social justice turn (e.g., Mills, 2012; Sharpe & Dear, 2013). Donahue and Luber (2015) point out that service-learning – and particularly those examples that invoke queer theory or work with queer communities – can enact what Kumashiro (2009) describes as a "pedagogy of crisis" wherein students' critical examination and unlearning of outdated assumptions can cause great emotional distress. Emotional crises can arise when students come to realize that they have behaved in oppressive ways or have unfairly benefitted from – or been disadvantaged by – an inequitable system. Adding to the complexity, other students may encounter intense emotions when they feel they have been marginalized, or are expected to speak for/on behalf of a group they are perceived to represent. How are educators to respond to and teach through varying types of affective engagement? These possibly harrowing experiences, while seeming to be destabilizing in their discomfort, have great transformative potential, and service-learning scholarship confirms the expectation that students *should* encounter and grapple with discomfort.

Building on the field's engagement with ambiguity, Butin (2007) proposes that service-learning is a "paradigmatic example of postmodern pedagogy" which effectively resists the quest for finality and closure, and "works to disturb students' notions of

static truth" (p. xiii). Extending this notion, Bruce (2013) offers Biesta's (2006, 2010) "pedagogy of interruption" as a way to frame service-learning that is "relational" in that it can neither be scripted nor provide any sense of closure or sureness, particularly pertaining to the meaning of justice. This notion of ambiguity, on the one hand, can stand in direct contradiction to some social justice approaches, which may at times over-emphasize the (often undefined) goals of empowerment, solidarity, and equity. On the other hand, our specific conception of social justice is rooted in a sense of humility, which recognizes that "justice" is differently defined, and that those who script the definitions and have the voice to publicly make claims, are not necessarily representative of those who experience injustice. Furthermore, in line with Bruce's relational service-learning, justice may be conceived differently across varying contexts, and cannot be pre-defined previous to the encounter with the Other. The social justice turn recognizes the limitations of pre-defined notions of justice, and emphasizes in its conceptualization the important role of ambiguity, and an ongoing openness to new characterizations of social justice from a range of perspectives and throughout ongoing historical transformations.

Critical Hope: "An Action-Oriented Response to Contemporary Despair"

Is there a way that those who struggle with despair in our present moment can find common ground – and work together – with those who remain hopeful? In writing this paper, we called up vivid memories of conference rooms, social situations, and service-learning field experiences, wherein – grossly simplified – individuals labeled as "idealists" came nose-to-nose with those labeled "cynics." The former sometimes perceive the cynics as "killjoys" – outspoken radicals who struggle with the current neoliberal university environment and who do not recognize that service-learning is a win-win-win pedagogy that fulfills our university's public service mandate, teaches students effectively through hands-on experience, and collaborates with communities on projects that are important to them. The latter sometimes perceive the idealists as focusing too intently on the needs of the powerful institution and privileged students while devaluing historicity, identity, structural violence, and the voices and desires of partner communities.

Similarly, in the case of Alan Kurdi, for example, those labeled idealists might recognize the horror of this tragedy but position it simultaneously as a moment that can catalyze change, build bridges of compassion, and bring people together for a cause.

The cynics, in response, might gesture to a long history of global exploitation and conflict leading to his death, the abhorrence of a system that stipulates who has rights to mobility and who does not, and the fact that there have been numerous victims before and after Alan who also deserve justice. "Critical hope" (Boler, 2004; Bozalek et al., 2014; Freire, 2007) offers a conceptual, *relational* space in which *both* perspectives – and the many nuanced, complex variations similar to them – can coexist simultaneously. In fact, it is very likely that versions of two such bifurcations will exist in simultaneity and in constant tension within the same individual.

Critical hope is, on the one hand, a conceptual and theoretical direction and, on the other, "an action-oriented response to contemporary despair" (Bozalek et al., 2014, p. 1). As an idea, it is inspired by the praxis and frameworks of critical theory, particularly those emerging from the Frankfurt School, neo-Marxist critiques, and the work of Freire (Bozalek et al., 2014; Freire, 1970, 2007). It can be summarized as "an act of ethical and political responsibility that has the potential to recover a lost sense of connectedness, relationality, and solidarity with others" (Zembylas, 2014, p. 14). We propose that the social justice turn in service-learning is premised on, and can be aided by, the necessary tension between criticality – of privilege, charity, hegemony, representation, history, and inequality – along with a hope that is neither naïve nor idealistic, but that remains committed to ideals of justice, reflexivity, and solidarity. The criticality and hope that underlie the social justice turn in service-learning cannot be disaggregated but rather must work in tandem with one another at all times. Kezar and Rhoads (2001) identify a number of tensions that persist in the field, highlighting the question of service-learning's central learning outcomes: Is it meant to bolster social responsibility, enhance understanding of multiculturalism and empathy, or foster thinking and writing skills? In short, these authors ask, is the pedagogy of service-learning approached with a cognitive or affective understanding of learning? Critical hope not only creates space for *both,* but insists upon their interplay as a foundational requirement.

Bozalek, Carolissen, Liebowitz, and Boler (2014) outline two ways that critical hope can be used: First, it may serve as a "unitary and unified concept which cannot be disaggregated from either hopefulness or criticality" (p. 1), and second, it may function as an analytical concept that honors and theorizes the affective, the political, the spiritual, and the intellectual. Zembylas (2014), drawing on Boler (2004), Freire, (1994), and Duncan-Andrade (2009), distinguishes critical hope from other less

progressive notions: "naïve hope" (Boler, 2004; Freire, 1994) that can be summarized as "blind faith that things will get better" (Zembylas, 2014, p. 13); "hokey hope" that is rooted in individualistic, tired narrative that folks who just "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" can overcome any barriers and live out their dreams (Duncan-Andrade, 2009); "mythical hope" that is premised on "the false narrative of equal opportunity, emptied of its historical and political contingencies" (Duncan-Andrade, p. 182); and "hope deferred," which, while founded on progressive ideals, can get caught up in the process of critiquing inequitable systems and structures while stopping short of active engagement due to the belief that no pedagogical approach can have actual transformative potential because of the broader barriers extant throughout and beyond the education system (Duncan-Andrade). In contrast with these notions, critical hope engages with both the critical and the emotional (Zembylas):

> To say that someone is critically hopeful means that the person is involved in a critical analysis of power relations and how they constitute one's emotional ways of being in the world, while attempting to construct, imaginatively and materially, a different lifeworld. (p. 13)

Overlaying some of the key tenets of critical hope onto our understanding of service-learning can assist those who feel torn between a strong sense of both optimism and pessimism. Service-learning, as a pedagogy that crosses cultural, racial, national, and disciplinary borders (to name only a few), is rich with opportunities to analyze power relations; such border crossing frequently generates intensely emotional experiences, which offers all partners occasions for reflection on the ways in which emotions are determined and affected by hegemony, privilege, and social conditioning. Finally, the aspect that distinguishes service-learning from other forms of experiential learning is oriented in the construction of what Zembylas (2014) calls "a different lifeworld" (p. 13) – service activities led by the communities most affected. In short, critical hope provides a conceptual space in which those invested in the social justice turn in service-learning may concurrently take into account both the despairing events of our current historical moment along with the varied, often unjust histories of those involved, while also moving forward with the development of programs and partnerships that may well generate changes that decrease suffering and dismantle unjust structures. After all, as Apple (2015) reminds us, "despair and cynicism only help those in dominance" (p. xvi).

Social Justice Service Learning: Three case studies

In our work, we see critical hope enacted through programs designed to do more toward fostering social justice through critical learning and systemic change rather than more temporary transformational experiences for individuals. One example of a promising community-engaged program is offered by Catlett and Proweller (2016) whose work reveals how "feminist-informed community based service-learning experiences can be a vehicle for advancing social justice" (p. 65). They use critical feminist theoretical perspectives to engage university students in reflection and dialogue about youth relationship violence, activism, and community work. In particular, they work with students in a year-long engagement that involves both a 10-week service-learning placement and a deeper involvement with an established dating violence prevention program called "Take back the halls: Ending violence in relationships and schools." The authors emphasize the importance of service-learning being "existentially disturbing" (Butin, 2010, p. 20) and unsettling in order to uncover the systemic nature of inequality, injustice, and complicity.

The program design and pedagogical approaches outlined by Catlett and Proweller (2016) include a number of components that both promoted and assessed learning through the university course and its service-learning component while facilitating the anti-violence program with high school students. They enacted activities and assessments that appear to work toward a kind of critical hope with their course. Students engaged in in-depth qualitative interviews at the beginning and again at the end of the program, focusing on their lessons learned, their interest in the program on interpersonal violence, and the lives of urban youth. They also wrote reflective "Who Am I" papers at the beginning of the academic quarter, which they revisited and revised at the end of the term, exploring particularly their own multiple identities and life experiences as well as similar reflections on the lives of the students with whom they worked. All components of the program were created and viewed through a feminist lens, fostering greater depth of critical engagement toward social justice along with significant insights aimed at both individual and collective transformation. As the authors describe it,

> feminist-informed community based service-learning directs attention to the root causes of social problems, compelling student learners to go beyond superficial examination of social inequity to deeper exploration of the systemic bases of intersecting forms of power

and oppression. . . . And to locate themselves within intersecting axes of privilege and oppression . . . [with a focus on] accountability – identifying the ways in which we are implicated in intersecting systems of inequality and developing criteria against which we measure our accountability to the communities with whom we are engaged. (pp. 68–69)

Results of their research on this program show that "the learning environment should be an authentic community in which students feel safe and supported to engage in non-judgmental, open-ended inquiry, exploring critical connections between material learning in the classroom and their personal experiences" (p. 85). Not surprisingly, students' learning experiences were uneven and disquieting, often fraught with discomfort, and data showed "evidence of confusion, ambivalence, and even resistance" (p. 86) as students grappled with their own implication in systems of inequity as well as empowered as part of a broader effort toward social change.

Another service-learning approach with postsecondary students that shows promise in enacting the ideals of critical hope is through the development of critical social justice programs involving co-curricular "alternative breaks" that afford students the opportunity to develop crucial understandings of the root causes and complexities of social issues in host communities. Sumka, Porter, and Piacitelli (2015) outline promising models and examples of this approach as well as key components of the program. When designed to foster in students a nuanced understanding of systems and the identities of those working within them, alternative break program participants "are better able to address those issues with humility, a broader perspective, and sensitivity to complexity. . . . to work with an eye toward structural change and capacity building" (p. 13).

Creating a detailed plan for alternative breaks that includes components required by the Break Away organization, for example, allows students to gain the quality and depth of understanding that will foster greater success in attaining social justice goals. Their eight components include the following: (a) strong, direct, "hands-on" service in activities that address unmet social needs; (b) an alcohol and drug free environment; (c) attention to diversity and social justice focusing on power, privilege, and oppression; (d) a strong orientation to the values and mission of the community partner prior to departure; (e) effective education with multiple perspectives on social issues; (f) adequate training in the skills and tasks necessary for the par-

ticular project; (g) opportunities for reflection both individually and as a group; and (h) reorientation to internalize and transfer lessons learned, sharing their experience to continue to raise awareness on social issues as well as taking action through direct service and advocacy (Sumka, Porter, & Piacitelli, 2015, p. 21). These programs share with community-based service-learning a commitment to reciprocal partnership development, attention to a critical understanding of power and privilege, a strong educational foundation, and a commitment to social action (p. 17). Aligning their work with the critical service-learning model articulated by Mitchell (2008), the authors demonstrate how thoughtfully designed alternative break programs can be part of the necessary social change that addresses "structural systems of inequality, injustice, oppression, and marginalization" (Sumka et al., p. 18). They assert that

by engaging in community driven direct service that addresses root causes of social issues and preparing participants to continue the work of social change throughout their lives, alternative breaks can be part of the greater community working toward a more just society. (p. 18)

An underlying principle that guides these programs is the promotion of a critically informed active citizenship that attends to social justice through gaining a personal connection to social issues, an understanding of the root causes, and a commitment to collective action against oppression and inequity.

As a final example, and with some self-consciousness, we offer a community-driven university program that reflects how service-learning can work toward these goals, one in which we have both played central roles. Author Lund is co-founder of the Service-Learning Program (SLP) for pre-service teachers and continues to teach in the program at the University of Calgary, in Alberta, Canada, and Grain worked at a nonprofit agency that is a Community Partner in the program as well as serving on the community-based Working Group that acts as a steering committee for the program. Founded in 2011 by Lund and Lianne Lee, along with a team of community and campus collaborators, the SLP (Lund, 2016) provides pre-service teachers with weekly opportunities to examine theory and engage in critical reflection and hands-on experiences with young people through community agency programs. The integration of teacher education for social justice, critical service-learning models, and anti-oppressive pedagogical approaches through a social justice framework support students in translating their learning when they enter classrooms as teachers.

One of the most significant strengths of the SLP and the collaborative model from which it was built is its long-term focus on implementing system-level strategies that contribute to the quality of life for diverse children, youth, and their families. The SLP has taken a permanent place in the Faculty of Education and has grown to include agencies working with immigrant and refugee children, youth with disabilities, youth with LGBTTQ identities, and Indigenous children and youth. Each agency is offered the opportunity to send key leaders to participate in the Working Group to offer continual feedback into the program, now planning for its sixth iteration. Further, it includes a 5-year ongoing research component that includes pre- and post-semester interviews as well as classroom and field observations. This has resulted in a robust data set that offers rich insights into reciprocal community engagement, fostering cultural humility, and critical teacher education for social justice (e.g., Lee & Lund, 2016; Lund & Lee, 2015).

A Tool for Social Justice Service-Learning

If critical hope calls for reflection and action on topics such as solidarity and equity, one of our key roles as service-learning educators and practitioners is to offer students experiences that interrogate their own assumptions *in tandem with* tools that assist them in accessing those assumptions and working to change them, move beyond them, and act upon them at a systemic level. A useful tool for the identification of relevant issues in social justice service-learning can be found in Andreotti's (2012) "HEADS UP" framework, which is predicated on critical literacy in global engagement and uses an acronym to highlight the complexities of "Hegemony, Ethnocentrism, Ahistoricism, Depoliticization, Salvationism, Uncomplicated solutions and Paternalism" (p. 1). Andreotti suggests that HEADS UP can move learners away from naïve hope and toward a stance of "skeptical optimism and ethical solidarities" (p. 2) by prompting important conversations about the "problematic historical patterns of thinking and relationships" summarized by the terms in the above list. If service-learning students are able to identify and problematize their own complicity in a notion such as Salvationism (one of the seven highlighted), they can extend their critical reflection by asking specific questions about that term, which Andreotti provides in her tool. For example, she offers this question in relation to Salvationism: "does this initiative acknowledge the self-centered desire to be better than/superior to others, and the imposition of aspirations for singular ideas of progress and development that have historically been part of what creates injustice?" (p. 2). Given the great diversity of student project placements under the banner of service-learning, this tool can be a catalyst for important modes of reflection and dialogue, particularly to consider not only how a given project can serve the goals of community members but also how a given project might inadvertently reify stereotypes or harmful ideas. In addition to these social justice considerations, and echoing what many social justice service-learning scholars have ideated, we suggest that service-learning steeped in critical hope attends specifically to a variety of identity markers that render some people marginalized or oppressed based on ability, race, gender, gender identity, sex, socioeconomic status, nationality, religion, mental health, and many more.

Conclusion

In conceiving and writing this article, we debated how to best integrate some global and localized events that have captured the hearts and minds of so many people around the world. What does the dangerous rhetoric in the wake of Brexit, for example, have to do with our relatively small and specialized academic field? How does the Black Lives Matter movement play out in service-learning research and practice? How does racialized police brutality factor in to our commitment to community engagement? How does the systemic problem of missing and murdered Indigenous women affect Canadian universities' curricular, pedagogical, and community engagement practices? Why did an image of Alan Kurdi washed up on a Greek beach invoke us to reflect on our global responsibility in response to a distant civil war and widespread Islamophobia? Weeks after Alan's image first appeared in the news, and not long after, we observed too much social media Islamophobia to wrap our heads around, we settled into a kind of despair, and finally turned our attention to these questions. Our social circles seemed awash with fear, and people we had thought to be reasonably astute had become voices of intolerance. We wondered how service-learning could respond to issues that had come to paint an increasingly troubling social and political landscape in which we conduct our work. How can we, as educators, practitioners, and activists in service-learning, engage with diverse students and communities, some of whom are facing their greatest challenges of oppression and marginalization in recent history? And what of those practices in our field that inadvertently contribute to inequality and injustice? How are we ourselves complicit?

We ask these questions not because we know the answers, but because now more than ever we seek the wisdom and solidarity of our service-learning partners and colleagues, and we deeply believe that our field needs to engage in the conversation about our proverbial tipping point that will individually and collectively move us along in the social justice turn. Each individual and community will respond differently to gripping news stories and personal injustice(s), so how might we begin a dialogue (and then move beyond dialogue) about those highly emotional learning moments that render us too devastated to be silent, too angry to be idle, or too frustrated to keep doing the same thing over and over?

The result of our reflection became this manuscript, an intellectually premised argument not only that a social justice turn has begun in service-learning, led by visionary critical scholars like Mitchell, Butin, Bruce, and others, but also an impassioned argument that a social justice turn must continue, not only as a reaction to "a world gone mad," but as a continuous commitment to taking action and critically reflecting upon issues that affect us, our communities, students, faculty, and local and global partners. The promising exemplars identified above provide merely a glimpse into the kinds of bold engagements that might continue to point us in the right direction. We believe that the future of the social justice turn – while it is fueled by initiatives that *do* work – could be equally strengthened by examining those initiatives that "backfired," "failed," or did not serve the goals of social justice within the field. In fact, we suggest that learning from our mistakes in the enactment of critical hope is as vital as learning from our successes, and such a task requires vulnerability and risk-taking. We do not attempt in this paper to create or reveal a new or universalizing solution to the highly contextual problems that plague our societies and our field; instead, this article is a reminder of an idea that is quite old: that as times change so too must our educational approaches. And times, changing (or rather, being exposed) as violently and swiftly as they have been recently, require equally responsive transformations – not simply individually, but also in our families, our faculties, our classrooms, our institutions, and our quiet, back-room conversations. Service-learning can remain highly relevant *if* it continues to shift away from charitable volunteer approaches and White normativity, toward an embrace of ambiguity and discomfort, and with an acceptance that hope and struggle toward social justice are contradictory yet *complementary* allies in our work.

Just as service-learning from a social justice perspective is not undertaken to absolve privileged individuals and communities of guilt or complicity in issues of inequality, the response to global injustices such as the death of Alan Kurdi must not be used as a strategy to absolve individuals and institutions of structural, self-implicating critiques. Alan represents a victim who invoked in many a highly empathetic and compassionate response because he is understood to be an innocent child. But what of victims who are not perceived as innocent, and with whom the masses have more trouble identifying and empathizing? The selective nature of compassion and empathy is as vital a conversation as any in the future of the social justice turn in service-learning, and by extension, so is how to avoid using the narratives of innocent victims as a means to affirm the "goodness" of those who respond. Thus, key to the conceptual turn is the notion that service-learning must neither be centered on students' and institutions' desire to "do good" nor their own definitions of justice but, rather, it must be driven by community collaborations, common goals, and definitions that emerge differently over time and geography. In this way, as Bruce (2013) suggests, the pedagogy's *relational* characteristic becomes of paramount importance; there are many (sometimes incommensurable) approaches to social justice that can neither be scripted nor predetermined, and yet it is vital to outline what is desired by all collaborators when service-learning is oriented from this perspective.

The social justice turn is simultaneously a conflict-ridden struggle against inequality, xenophobia, and oppression, and an insistence on education's responsibility as a conduit of hope – not the naïve kind disaggregated from conflict, but the kind that understands struggle as a necessary component of change. This turn understands itself to be (as with education more broadly) continuously obsolete, and therefore, continuously "turning" conceptual curves in response to – and in anticipation of – broader global issues that determine our field's priorities. As Butin (2007) reminds us, "if service-learning is to avoid becoming overly normalized, we must continuously question and disturb our assumptions, our terms, and our practices" (p. xi). The social justice turn is premised upon an ongoing cycle of critiquing, reimagining, re-acting, and responding to the issues highlighted by our current moment, and undergirded by varied histories of resisting oppression. Just because social justice dialogues and voices are becoming louder in our field and in mainstream media does not mean that institutions and broader structures themselves are changing – and this transformation we take as one of our key goals moving forward. Building this

struggle on a foundation of critical hope offers a conceptual space in which those who are justifiably immobilized, nonplussed, or enraged by continued examples of injustice may find solidarity with those who are stubbornly hopeful and oriented in the possibilities and potentialities of service-learning – and indeed education – to move through, with, and beyond despair.

Notes

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[1] We use the upper case here to signify that this word represents a racialized category that is a social construction, and not simply the color.

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Authors

KARI GRAIN (kari.grain@gmail.com) is a doctoral candidate and Vanier Scholar in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia, where she currently works in the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology. Grain also develops curriculum and pedagogy for service-learning and experiential education courses across UBC. Previously held positions include service-learning manager at the University of Calgary and division manager of education programs for an immigrant and refugee settlement organization. Grain's master's thesis on volunteer teacher programs in Rwanda garnered the Michele Laferriere Award for top Canadian thesis in comparative education. Her research interests include social justice and global service-learning, international development, critical emotion and affect studies, and the politics of hope in global engagement efforts. Her current fieldwork uses photovoice and community-based research to examine community impacts of an international service-learning program in rural Uganda. Grain serves as assistant editor for the upcoming *Wiley International Handbook of Service-Learning for Social Justice.*

DARREN E. LUND (dlund@ucalgary.ca) is a professor in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary, where his research examines social justice activism. Before earning his

PhD from the University of British Columbia, Darren was a high school teacher for 16 years. Darren has published over 300 articles, chapters, and books, and has been recognized with many honors, including the *2015 Alberta Teachers' Association Educational Research Award* and the *2012 Scholar-Activist Award* from the American Educational Research Association. Lund was also named a *Reader's Digest National Leader in Education* and one of Red Deer's *Top Educators of the Century*. Darren is co-founder of the award-winning *Service-Learning Program for Pre-Service Teachers*, and the editor of the upcoming *Wiley International Handbook of Service-Learning for Social Justice.*