PREFACE

As educators, we have yet to collectively address a very difficult truth. Despite our best efforts to support and care for one another and to cultivate safe spaces and communities, violence plays a significant role in the culture of instruction. Of course, this truth does not necessarily mean that all students and faculty face threats of physical harm on a regular basis, although many in America live in fear of school shootings (Graf) or death threats made by far-right adversaries who keep "watch lists" of targeted professors (Abrams). While such instances certainly define the current state of education in America, our focus is on a manifestation of violence that is often less visible: systemic, structural, and symbolic violence that disproportionately affects marginalized students.

We are not the first to write about the creep of violence in education. Paul Gorski, for instance, argues that educators' good intentions do not excuse the continued use of instructional practices that maintain dominant hegemonies. Gorski critiques the "propagation of deficit theory—an approach for justifying inequality" and for giving educators permission to believe that some students are simply meant to fail (518). Often, deficit-based assumptions subjugate particular students for no other fault than their identities or, as Anthony Abraham Jack illustrates in *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*, their economic and cultural backgrounds. Even when low-income students are admitted into elite institutions, they often lack the financial and social resources to navigate these spaces effectively. Higher education remains structured to benefit those who can afford unpaid internships, extracurricular involvement, and networking opportunities. Rather than addressing these harmful inequities,

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deficit theory allows institutions to believe instead that students choose not to participate in these "opportunities" because they lack motivation, work ethic, or ability. Deficit theory normalizes microaggressions and casts a veil of meritocracy over privilege.

Racial microaggressions—subtle, everyday acts of discrimination—further act as a form of psychological and emotional violence that typically operates under the radar of awareness. Faculty and students of color frequently report being questioned about their intelligence, being ignored in classroom discussions, or being assumed to be undeserving of their place on campus (Orelus). These seemingly minor interactions have cumulative, deeply harmful effects, shaping students' self-perceptions and ability to succeed. Jack recounts a story that illustrates subtle economic violence enacted by a well-meaning program that was intended to support incoming students on financial assistance programs. The program required students to perform "community detail," in which they served as housekeepers for the residence halls in exchange for assistance. The majority of the students enrolled in the program were Black and Latino students from families who regularly performed similar forms of low-wage labor. After spending one fall semester cleaning dorms, a student in the program received an envelope from one of his wealthier classmates. Inside was a "Christmas bonus." The student shared with Jack that he realized "his classmate regarded him as his servant. He left for home dispirited" (155). Jack's ultimate point resonates with us and drives this book. We may all aspire to "do no harm," largely through the opportunities afforded by education; yet many practices, like the way we respond to students, "place them right in the thick of danger" (Jack 187).

Pedagogy of Kindness by Catherine Denial also argues that higher education often enforces an academic culture that dehumanizes students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. The expectation of hyperproductivity, punitive grading structures, and lack of support for mental health disproportionately affect students who are already navigating multiple layers of discrimination. Women, LGBTQ+ students, racial minorities, and students with disabilities face additional layers of exclusion. Academic spaces often dismiss discussions of gender, sexuality, and disability as so-called special interests, signaling that these identities are secondary to the supposed universality of knowledge. Ableism manifests

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in inaccessible classrooms, dismissive faculty attitudes, punitive classroom policies, and a failure to provide necessary accommodations; such examples further push students to the margins. As Asao Inoue points out in *Cripping Labor-Based Grading for More Equity in Literacy Courses*, some approaches to writing instruction can unfairly exaggerate disabilities and inaccessibility in the classroom. The refusal to recognize the lived experiences of marginalized students is itself a form of emotional and psychological violence, reinforcing a hierarchy governing whose knowledge, voices, and experiences matter.

The academic violence to which these scholars call attention often operates through policies, social interactions, and cultural norms that systematically exclude and harm marginalized groups. These forms of violence compound over time, leading to increased stress, academic struggles, and even internalized assessments of identities and roles in society. Startled by the violent effects of deficit theory, bell hooks observes how routinely students suffer in educational systems: "Students from nonprivileged backgrounds . . . were crushed. More often than not, they dropped out with no trace of their inner anguish recorded, no institutional record of the myriad ways their take on the world was assaulted by an elite vision of class and privilege. The records merely indicated that, even after receiving financial aid and other support, these students simply could not make it, simply were not good enough" ("Learning" B16).

If higher education is to become a truly equitable space, we must dismantle the violent structures that maintain racial, economic, and social hierarchies. A pedagogy rooted in nonviolence—one that acknowledges structural violence and actively works to counteract it—is essential. As Shamari Reid suggests in *Humans Who Teach*, educators must also resist the notion that rigor and care are incompatible. A more humane approach to response—one that validates students' experiences and removes punitive barriers—can begin to undo the violence embedded within the system. Considering the magnitude of such a task, there are no simple solutions, no cookbooks to institutional transformation, and no prompts for ChatGPT to quickly resolve things.

Entire journals (e.g., *ADVANCE*), magazines (e.g., *Change* or *Rethinking Schools*), and conferences exist to help those working to repurpose higher education into a liberatory space. With this

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book, we offer an approach that can have an immediate impact on the human students in our care as well as on ourselves. We hope that this book helps inform the practices of all teachers and writers, including writing scholars, writing program directors and coordinators, graduate students, and others who continue to improve their response practices. Our combined decades of experience in writing, teaching writing, and writing about writing indicate that responding to student writing is an incredibly important site of discursive identity formation, presenting a perfect opportunity to imbue a common, but also typically high-stakes, social interaction with nonviolence. Doing so, we argue throughout the book, can liberate teachers and students from the continuously reproduced acts of harm baked into the culture of instruction.

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