

RACIAL HEALING

Radical Hope as a Transformative Praxis in the Face of Hate and Intolerance

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Radical hope is a transformative approach suited to sustain collective resilience in moments of crisis and profound disorientation. In our current moment of democratic backsliding, vilification and scapegoating of people and groups, increased hate crime incidence, and increased sociopolitical polarization, radical hope offers an approach that bridges theoretical and historical insights with actionable strategies. It can serve as a catalyst for collective action, enabling communities to confront systemic oppression while imagining and constructing just alternatives. We examine four theoretical and practical dimensions of radical hope: envisioning beyond the present, collective resilience, moral anchoring, and sustained engagement. In doing so, we argue for integrating radical hope as a transformative approach, particularly for public administration scholars and practitioners as they respond to threats to democracy, including challenges to values of social equity and inclusion.

In an era marked by escalating hate incidents and socio-political polarization (Eisen and Katz 2025; Fasching et al 2024; Levin, Nolan, and Perst 2022; Mason 2018; Oladipo 2023), the search for meaningful approaches to resist division and foster solidarity is both urgent and essential. Such challenges necessitate responses that not only resist oppression but also build equitable and inclusive futures. Public administration, as a field and a practice, plays a central role in shaping the institutions, policies, and governance structures that either reinforce or dismantle systemic inequities. In this political moment, social equity, a pillar of public administration (Wooldridge and Bilharz 2017), is under attack (Conyers and Fields 2025; Schrag and Daher 2025; Wilson 2023). This could be met with a range of actions including exit, voice, loyalty (Hirschman 1970), or dissent (O’Leary 2006). In this article, we wish to offer another approach, one rooted in conflict transformation and liberatory praxis. This article explores radical hope as transformative praxis—a theoretical and practical approach for addressing these challenges and sustaining collective resilience. While the lessons we draw out in this article are important for all of us, they are particularly salient for public administration schol-

ars and practitioners, who are essential in responding to threats to democracy, including challenges to values of social equity and inclusion. Radical hope offers an alternative to despair and panic. Rather than accept the way things are or seek a return to the past, through radical hope we can collectively build a liberatory, equitable future. We position radical hope as a way of engaging with and shaping this moment of profound change, bridging theoretical insights with actionable strategies. Radical hope requires our understanding of the world as it is (theory) colliding with our vision of what the world can be (imagination) and leading to collective action. As Freire (1994, 2) explains, “hope, as an ontological need, demands an anchoring in practice.” In this article, we examine how radical hope serves as a catalyst for collective action, enabling communities to confront systemic oppression while imagining and constructing just alternatives. Finding inspiration from the “Day of Radical Hope” organized at Kent State University (Nickels and Hsiao 2024), the article illustrates the transformative potential of this approach. This discussion unfolds first by providing the theoretical foundations of radical hope. Then, we examine four theoretical and practical dimensions of radical hope in theory and practice: envi-

sioning beyond the present, collective resilience, moral anchoring, and sustained engagement. We then discuss the application of this approach in the “Day of Radical Hope,” an event hosted by a coalition of Kent State University faculty, staff, and students on November 4, 2024. Through exploring the theoretical grounding and practical application of radical hope, the article argues for integrating radical hope as a transformative approach.

Foundations of Radical Hope

Radical hope is both a theoretical construct and a practical strategy. Its conceptual foundation draws from diverse intellectual traditions that converge on the need for transformative engagement in the face of adversity (Duncan-Andrade 2009; Lear 2006; Mosley et al. 2022; Strazds 2019). It is not prescriptive; it thrives in the tension between theory and praxis, requiring both reflection and action to dismantle oppression and build inclusive futures (Freire 1994). Radical hope is a disciplined approach that combines imagination, resilience, and commitment to social transformation. It emerges during crises of identity, culture, or systemic structures, moments of profound disorientation, where existing paradigms fail to offer solutions or meaningful paths forward and individuals and communities are compelled to confront loss and yet maintain a forward-looking perspective (Lear 2006; Stivers 2014). Radical hope presents itself in movements throughout history and the present. Lear (2006) describes radical hope as the ability to imagine a good that is currently incomprehensible, a framework for resilience when traditional cultural scaffolding collapses. Lear explores this concept through the case of Plenty Coups, the last great chief of the Crow Tribe, whose leadership navigated the profound existential crisis brought about by the collapse of the traditional Crow way of life due to U.S. settler colonial expansion. Rather than clinging to an ir-retrievable past, Plenty Coups embraced an open-ended form of hope—one that acknowledged rupture while still imagining the possibility of a meaningful future. Radical hope is distinct from optimism or naive belief in progress; rather, it requires a profound act of imagination in which a community reorients itself toward a future that cannot yet be fully described (Lear 2006). Lear’s analysis highlights that radical hope is not simply about resilience—it is about the creative capacity to sustain identity and meaning in the face of profound disruption. Stivers

(2014) differentiates Plenty Coups’ version of radical hope from the “social hope” of Dewey (1919) and Rorty (1999). Dewey and Rorty’s social hope is based on the assumption of growth and a better future, while Plenty Coups is based on dreams in a time of duress, where the future remains uncertain and a better future is not assumed. Enigmatic dreams of the future provide “a direction, but not a destination” (Stivers 2014, 234).

Plenty Coup’s conceptualization of radical hope as not providing a destination, but rather providing a direction, resonates with the iterative process of reflection, reimagination, and prefiguration seen in movements for justice, where communities must simultaneously mourn loss, resist oppression, and cultivate new ways of being (Freire 1994; Lear 2006). As Freire (1994) articulated, hope is an ontological necessity—a driving force for liberation that requires critical engagement with the world. Freire (1994) cautions against naïve hope, which, without the foundation of political struggle, risks devolving into despair. Similarly, hooks (2000) emphasized the transformative power of hope rooted in love and community, arguing that it sustains engagement with justice even under duress.

Radical hope is an approach shaped by historical and social contexts. Critical hope becomes an essential force in resisting apathy and despair, particularly when faced with systemic injustice (Duncan-Andrade 2009). Lorde (1989) discussed despair as a “tool of our enemies” and that to have hope, in the context of seeing the challenging realities in which we live, is essential. Janzen (2018) argues that fostering critical analysis of oppressive structures provides a foundation for hope that is neither passive nor disengaged but actively propels forward the struggle for justice.

Lederach’s (2005) concept of the moral imagination, which emphasizes the ability to envision and construct relationships that transcend entrenched divisions and hostility, complements radical hope. Lederach’s work highlights the importance of imagination as a tool for bridging seemingly intractable divides, fostering spaces where new relationships and social structures can emerge. As such, radical hope is forward-looking, focused on creating pathways to justice and renewal, particularly in contexts where traditional approaches to conflict resolution fall short. It is a commitment to action in a world where multiple futures remain possible, challenging deterministic narratives that see the future as foreclosed (Goldman 2024). This perspective aligns

with the core principles of conflict transformation: that new pathways emerge only when individuals and communities act to make them so.

Radical hope has also been explored in the context of racial justice (Hill-Jarrett 2023; Moseley et al. 2020), environmental struggles (Strazds 2019), and global movements for equity (Suffla, Malherbe, and Seedat 2020). Kaba (2021), in her work on police abolition, refers to hope as a disciplined practice, one that enables activists to persist against formidable odds. Bloch (1986) and West (2008) further explore the interplay between hope and action, emphasizing its capacity to generate new possibilities and sustain collective movements. Radical hope enables survival and renewal through its imaginative and disciplined engagement with the future. In this approach, theory serves not as a fixed blueprint but as a lens through which lived experiences of radical hope can be understood, adapted, and extended.

Dimensions and Praxis of Radical Hope

Radical hope operates through key elements that bridge abstract principles and actionable strategies: envisioning beyond the present, collective resilience, moral anchoring, and sustained engagement. These dimensions offer a deeper understanding of how radical hope can be translated into practice, where it finds its true strength. This section explores these elements in theory and in practice, demonstrating how they offer guidance for practitioners, activists, and community leaders.

Envisioning Beyond the Present

Radical hope cultivates the imaginative capacity to conceive futures that transcend the limitations of current realities. This forward-looking vision emphasizes the potential to reimagine relationships, structures, and systems during moments of collapse and uncertainty, offering pathways for transformative action through radical openness to the unknown (Bloch 1986; Lear 2006; Lederach 2005), resonating with Arendt's concept of natality that emphasizes humanity's capacity to initiate new beginnings in the face of profound challenges (Arendt 1958). This imaginative capacity allows individuals and communities to move beyond immediate realities, forging pathways to possibilities that were previously unthinkable. Damhof and Gulmans (2023) reinforce this connection between imagination and hope, arguing that in times of deep uncertainty, rethinking our assumptions about the future is not just beneficial

but necessary. Radical hope becomes an active process of imagining what has been framed as impossible by staking "claim to the future" (Reinsborough 2010, 67) and thinking beyond the boundaries of what is possible placed on our imaginations by those who benefit from the continuation of existing hierarchies (Benjamin 2024). Boulding (2002) highlights how envisioning the future inspires concrete action, even among those in restrictive environments. She argues that the reason to remember the past is to inform action in the present to bring forth the future we want (Boulding 2002; see also Newman 2014).

Envisioning futures that transcend the limitations of the present requires intentional engagement with imagination and collective creativity. This mechanism thrives in contexts where communities articulate shared aspirations and imagine pathways toward justice and renewal. Participatory processes, including storytelling and dialogue, are central to this work, as they transform fragmented societies into collaborative agents of change (Cardwell 2020). Participatory visioning in post-conflict settings has been shown to foster trust and momentum for reconstruction by creating spaces where diverse voices articulate shared aspirations (Botes 2003; Schirch 2005). Furthermore, transitional justice processes emphasize long-term goals of accountability and reconciliation as essential to rebuilding societies in ways that are both just and sustainable (Androff 2012).

Collective Resilience

Radical hope is deeply rooted in the capacity of communities to build collective resilience, which transforms individual despair into shared agency (Cardwell 2020; Pauli 2019; Strazds 2019). This process relies on the formation of relational networks that sustain efforts toward justice and renewal, particularly during times of systemic oppression and adversity (Freire 1994; Lederach 2005). It is through these relational dynamics that communities not only resist oppressive systems but also co-create spaces of renewal and transformation. For example, scholars highlight how community organizing serves as a cornerstone for resilience, enabling marginalized groups to mobilize resources, amplify their voices, and build collective power (Tilly 2006; West 2008). Furthermore, this resilience is sustained by a commitment to shared values such as equity and justice, ensuring that collective efforts remain principled even in the face of profound challenges (Chordiya and Protonentis 2024;

Kaba 2021). Blessett (2023) discusses how resilience is built out of necessity by those in marginalized groups. In particular, she focuses on Black women's creation of "non-traditional strategies to navigate the world, support each other, and advocate for ideas that empower other oppressed groups" (47). By anchoring resistance in shared practices and values, collective resilience becomes a powerful mechanism of radical hope, offering a pathway for communities to persist and thrive despite systemic obstacles. This often involves the creation of mutual aid networks, community-based organizations, and coalitions that empower marginalized groups to take collective action and imagine new possibilities (hooks 2000; Kaba 2021). During the Flint Water crisis, local activists demonstrated collective resilience by organizing to amplify residents' voices, distribute essential resources, and hold governmental authorities accountable (Nickels 2019). Their efforts exemplified how despair can be transformed into shared agency and actionable solutions (Pauli 2019).

Research on indigenous environmental justice movements highlights how grassroots organizing efforts relied on relational dynamics to maintain coherence in the face of systemic oppression (LaDuke 1999). Kemmis (2006) further underscores that such movements derive their strength from mutual support and a shared sense of purpose, enabling them to withstand repression and achieve long-term goals. Similarly, mutual aid practices during periods of economic crisis have been identified as critical elements of resilience, as they bolster resistance against exploitative systems (Gordon 2008).

Moral Anchoring

Grounded in justice, equity, and human dignity, radical hope serves as a moral compass guiding actions toward ethically aligned outcomes (Freire 1994). This moral foundation is deeply connected to the pursuit of social justice, ensuring that hope-driven actions align with broader ethical commitments to equity and inclusion (Bloch 1986; Nussbaum 1997). Jane Addams (1902) underscored the relational nature of moral action, emphasizing mutual care and shared values as foundational to democratic engagement. While Addams does not explicitly frame her work in terms of "hope," her vision of social justice implies a collective commitment to creating equitable futures. Similarly, Gandhi (1927) and King Jr. (1963) demonstrate how principled action, rooted in moral convictions, sustains hope in the face

of repression. By rooting resistance and renewal in ethical commitments, radical hope sustains efforts that are grounded in justice and inclusivity.

Moral anchoring provides the ethical foundation for actions rooted in radical hope. It ensures that resistance efforts remain principled and aligned with values of justice, equity, and dignity. For example, faith-based movements against apartheid in South Africa relied on moral convictions of equality and justice to sustain their efforts even under violent repression (Tutu 1999). Similarly, feminist organizing has highlighted love and solidarity as transformative forces, reinforcing the moral imperatives of collective action (hooks 2000). In contemporary contexts, moral anchoring is central to grassroots movements advocating for systemic change. The environmental justice movement, for instance, grounds its demands for ecological sustainability in the ethical stance that the well-being of communities and ecosystems is inseparable, aligning its strategies with principles of dignity and collective accountability (Martinez-Alier 2002). Moral anchoring also features prominently in restorative justice initiatives, where the emphasis on healing relationships and addressing harm reinforces ethical commitments to equity and care (Zehr 2002). These movements demonstrate that moral anchoring is a dynamic and practical strategy for inspiring trust, sustaining commitment, and advancing transformative change.

The distinction between "naïve hope" and "critical hope," as explored by Duncan-Andrade (2009), further enriches this discussion. Critical hope is deeply grounded in ethical clarity and a commitment to justice, avoiding the pitfalls of passivity while sustaining active resistance and renewal. Drawing on Freire's "pedagogy of love," Purcell (2020) asserts that radical community work is most effective when practitioners actively engage in relationships of mutual respect and care. Love—as a radical, political force—can serve as a counterweight to the dehumanization embedded in oppressive structures.

Sustained Engagement

Sustained engagement is essential to the praxis of radical hope, transforming emotional responses such as anger and grief into disciplined and purposeful action. Kaba (2021) describes hope as a practice that demands resilience, enabling individuals and communities to persist despite facing significant systemic obstacles. This

notion of disciplined hope is echoed in broader analyses of activist movements, where persistence and the capacity to counter burnout are critical components of long-term change (West 2008). By fostering a culture of care and shared purpose, sustained engagement not only counters apathy but also builds the relational networks necessary for enduring resistance and transformation (Purcell 2020). These insights underscore the necessity of embedding resilience into activist practices, ensuring that radical hope remains a generative force over time. Sustained engagement is not just about endurance but also about actively shaping the conditions for transformation through iterative reflection and action—an iterative process of both reclaiming history and shaping futures (Newman 2014). Building alternative institutions is a crucial dimension of sustained engagement. These institutions often emerge as forms of community care and solidarity, providing marginalized communities with the resources and networks needed to sustain activism over time. Mutual aid networks play a transformative role by addressing immediate needs while fostering collective capacity for systemic change (Spade 2020). Cooperative structures, including community land trusts and renewable energy co-ops in the fight for housing and climate justice, exemplify this dual role of resisting structural harm and creating sustainable alternatives (Fairbairn 2012; Taylor 2016). Rituals and collective practices are equally essential in fostering emotional endurance and strengthening community bonds. Shared meals, storytelling, and commemorations of progress create spaces for reflection and relational bonding, helping activists navigate the emotional toll of advocacy work. These rituals not only build resilience but also sustain the emotional and social foundations necessary for continued activism (Curnow and Helferty 2018).

The Day of Radical Hope

On November 4, 2024, Kent State University hosted the “Day of Radical Hope,” a campus-wide event designed to confront the increasing prevalence of hate incidents and socio-political division with an ethos of resilience, solidarity, and nonviolent action. Organized collaboratively by faculty, staff, and students, this day-long initiative emerged as a response to a series of acts of hate targeting Black, Jewish, Muslim, and LGBTQIA+ communities, including homophobic graffiti at Korb

Hall and anti-Semitic vandalism at Oscar Ritchie Hall. The event not only aimed to resist these incidents but also to foster a campus environment rooted in justice, equity, and hope.

The Day of Radical Hope featured a range of activities designed to engage participants on multiple levels—emotionally, intellectually, and practically. The day began with an opening circle titled “Together in Radical Hope,” held in Oscar Ritchie Hall. This space served as a grounding point for the day, bringing attendees together in a collective moment of reflection and solidarity. The session included a libation and land acknowledgment, a brief overview of recent campus incidents, and an embodied practice of grounding through breath, sound, and movement. Participants were encouraged to affirm their shared commitment to countering fear and division with hope and action.

Throughout the day, ongoing activities invited the campus community to engage creatively and collaboratively. Chalk stations placed around campus allowed students, faculty, and staff to write messages of solidarity, resilience, and hope. Prompts such as “What does radical hope mean to you?” and “How can we build solidarity in the face of hate?” encouraged reflection and public expression of the event’s themes. These chalked messages transformed campus walkways into a tapestry of collective hope, emphasizing the role of creativity and visibility in resistance.

Concurrent teach-ins provided opportunities for deeper exploration of radical hope in action. Sessions included topics such as “Radical Hope in LGBTQIA+ Movements for Liberation,” “Intersectionality and Collective Liberation,” and “Immigrant Justice and the Politics of Belonging.” Faculty and community leaders facilitated these discussions, equipping participants with historical context, strategies for organizing, and tools for building hope and resilience in their own lives and communities. The emphasis on participatory learning highlighted the relational dimensions of radical hope, fostering spaces where attendees could both share and co-create knowledge.

The day’s centerpiece was the panel discussion titled “Faculty Rights, Responsibilities, and Solidarity in the Face of Campus Hate,” which explored the role of educators in cultivating inclusive and just environments. Panelists discussed strategies for balancing professional responsibilities with active resistance to hate, emphasizing the importance of relational accountability and

collective action. The session reinforced the idea that radical hope is not a solitary endeavor but a collective commitment to imagining and building equitable futures.

The “Day of Radical Hope” demonstrated the transformative potential of radical hope as an approach. Participants reported feeling empowered by the event’s emphasis on creative expression, mutual care, and actionable strategies for resistance. Many highlighted the value of creating spaces for reflection and solidarity, particularly in response to incidents that often leave marginalized groups feeling isolated and vulnerable. By centering the voices and experiences of those most affected by hate, the event underscored the role of collective resilience in sustaining long-term efforts for change.

Conclusion

In a time of increased sociopolitical polarization (Fasching et al. 2024; Mason 2018), hate crime incidence (Levin, Nolan, and Perst 2022; Oladipo 2023), and democratic backsliding (Eisen and Katz 2025), radical hope provides a robust approach for understanding and addressing systemic oppression as an alternative to other approaches, including exit, voice, loyalty (Hirschman 1970) or dissent (O’Leary 2006). Its influence extends beyond individual interventions, challenging practitioners and scholars to adopt a dialectical approach that integrates theoretical insights with actionable strategies (Gordon 2008; Kemmis 1990). Freire’s (1994) foundational work on the ontological necessity of hope provides a crucial theoretical lens, illustrating how hope is not merely aspirational but a vital force for resistance and renewal.

One transformative impact of radical hope is its ability to reframe how practitioners engage with communities. Rather than relying on prescriptive models, radical hope emphasizes relational accountability and participatory approaches that center local knowledge and agency. For instance, participatory visioning processes in post-conflict societies highlight the importance of co-creating solutions that reflect the aspirations of those directly impacted by systemic injustice (Botes 2003; Schirch 2005). Another key contribu-

tion is its insistence on addressing structural violence through creating alternative institutions. These efforts are not merely reactive but proactive, seeking to build equitable systems that embody the principles of justice and dignity. For example, cooperative economic models and mutual aid networks provide tangible alternatives to exploitative systems, demonstrating how solidarity and care can be operationalized as part of long-term conflict transformation (Martinez-Alier 2002; Zehr 2002).

Radical hope invites the field of public administration to reconsider the role of emotional and social dynamics in conflict transformation. Practices such as storytelling, ritual, and shared reflection, which are often viewed as supplementary, emerge as central components of sustained engagement and collective resilience (Cardwell 2020; Curnow and Helferty 2018) to address the emotional toll of advocacy work and build the relational bonds necessary for enduring systemic change. Additionally, radical hope challenges scholars to think critically about their role in advancing justice-oriented scholarship, demanding an ethical commitment to equity, inclusivity, and solidarity, ensuring that the field remains responsive to evolving challenges and can be integrated into research, teaching, and practice.

Radical hope anticipates transformation even in the face of despair, making it a vital tool for practitioners and scholars alike. It is inseparable from the act of imagining beyond the present, is key to fostering resilience, is morally anchored, and is key to sustained engagement. By exploring the elements of radical hope and its application at Kent State University’s “Day of Radical Hope,” this article demonstrates how the concept moves beyond abstraction to action. We encourage practitioners to adopt a dialectical approach that integrates theory with lived experiences and community-led interventions. Such an approach ensures that public affairs scholarship remains dynamic, ethical, and responsive.

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