Textbooks as Tools for Liberation:
Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in the United States

Song:

There are secrets in the wind. Sit and let it whisper. Sit and let it scream. Sit and just listen. Give it a mic. It sounds like ancestors telling stories always told but never heard like wisdom overlooked, culture and celebration, healing and liberation. The keys to chains never broken, but still present. The present is freedom. Cost is high. The gift is work. Listen, listen, listen, listen. liberation. Come and get liberated. Come and get liberated. Come and get liberated. Join in. Liberation Now.

Salman Safir:

Welcome to Liberation Now, a podcast about research, practice, and activism around healing and liberation of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color. In each episode, we share inspirational content and stories to provide hope and possibilities for a more liberated future. We're your hosts, The Liberation Lab at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Hi, I'm Salman Safir.

Helen Neville:

And I'm Helen Neville.

Salman Safir:

And we are your co-host for today's episode, Textbooks as Tools for Liberation: Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in the United States. Dr. José Causadias is a Panamanian scholar and author of Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in the United States, a new Open Access Textbook published by Cambridge University Press.

He earned a PhD in child psychology at the University of Minnesota in 2014 and worked as faculty in the School of Family and Human Development at Arizona State University from 2015 to 2025. In 2025, he joined the Center for Education Research in Panama as a researcher and is now the Executive Director of the Center.

Helen Neville:

Welcome to Liberation Now Podcast, Dr. Causadias. I want to start off by saying how much I enjoyed reading your text. And for our listeners, it is really a masterpiece in developing critical consciousness. I appreciate how you weave this sharp critique of systems with language that was really accessible for almost anyone. And then you invited the reader to deep reflection and action.

I appreciate the case studies that humanize people's experiences and the interactive tools that were included. In this text, you cover the gambit from unpacking the myth of the American Dream to centering the scholarship and lived experiences of women of color, and I appreciate that a lot, to exposing how laws and policies create disorder and inequity.

And you end with this powerful call to action, which we'll talk about a little later on in our conversation. So thank you again for being here. We're really excited for this conversation. I'm wondering if you could start us off by telling us a bit about yourself and sharing what liberation means to you.

Dr. José Causadias:

Well, first of all, I want to thank you for inviting me. You had some really amazing guests in this podcast, and I've listened to them and I listened to you. So being in one of your episodes feels a little surreal. Thank you so much. Muchas gracias. My name is José Causadias, and I am a scholar. I am an activist. I'm a child psychologist, an immigrant, and I am someone who is working with others across borders to promote the well-being and liberation of children, youth, and families, and especially those who are Latin American, Black, Indigenous, people of color.

Liberation is someone who grew up in Panama in the 80s has a unique meaning. I grew up in a dictatorship until I was 13, and the '70s, the '80s was the sunset of the liberation movements in Latin America. A lot of left-wing inspired revolutions. In my opinion, most of them failed to deliver the goods. So, there is a sense what my background, my own experience growing in Latin America, that liberation has a different connotation politically. If you grew up in a humanist, progressive tradition, liberation can feel like, oh, we didn't really accomplish with the social movement, especially in Panama, what revolutionary movements promised. In Panama we had a revolution in 1968, but it became a dictatorship .

We got the Panama Canal back from Americans, but the social progress that was promised remains unfulfilled. So I am reclaiming liberation now to mean being in community, in my case, liberation means coming back home. And liberation means also working with others to have full autonomy and independence. And there's so many forms of liberation. There's psychological, physical, political liberation. But for me right now, being with you, liberation means being community and working together across borders to pursue justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Salman Safir:

Thanks so much, Dr. Causadias. And I loved what you were talking about reclaiming liberation and possibility, particularly given the personal history that you come to that term and idea and movement with. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about the impetus for writing this textbook and what you hoped to accomplish with the work.

Dr. José Causadias:

Thank you. I think it was 2017-'18 that I started to consider the idea of writing a textbook. I chose to teach a class called Family Ethnic and Cultural Diversity" that I taught for my 10 years at Arizona State University". And I taught to approximately 700 students . And the class really evolved from my background in biology and my passion for biology, evolution, and genetics.

So at first, I talked about genetic diversity, very colorblind, objective, using hard science to justify diversity and try a centrist approach. And progressively, I developed my own racial consciousness, and my own positionality shaped how the book came to be. The title changed from Diversity and Inclusion to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and then putting justice first unlocked so many things.

But the impetus came, especially as a passion project, to be honest, knowing that there wasn't something out there that fit what I wanted to share with my students, that I was about to get tenure. I got tenure in 2021, and I needed something that was new and exciting, so it's a deeply personal project. And then my wife and I lost a baby in 2019, and I wanted to do something for my baby, for my son, and I dedicate the book to him.

So, it was the personal, the political, the academic all coming together in a project that if I think back, I would write it with others, but I understand why I wrote it alone. I don't recommend it, but it's been a journey five years in the making, seven years in the making, the proposal with Cambridge, and the rounds and the sabbatical to write it. So, I think I would've written it faster, maybe differently if it was with colleagues.

And that's my goal in the future, but it's been a journey of self-awareness and it's a love letter to people I admire. And it's a love letter to the US, which is a wonderful country because it has wonderful people. My mother is a woman of color, so that section is out of love for my mother. Black people who welcome me in the US and to build the US, Indigenous people who take care of the land. It is a love letter to all of them.

The textbook is from an outsider perspective; as an immigrant coming in and look at what I've learned about the US. I start with the American Dream because that is what immigrants are drawn to, and I end with imagining a new future.

Helen Neville:

Thank you for sharing a little bit about this personal, political, professional journey that led you to writing this textbook, which is a gift in many ways. And I'm sorry about you and your wife's loss and trying to figure out ways to honor your child. You alluded to this a little bit in your discussion about the book, but I wanted to get more specific about your positionality and how your positionality has influenced the work and your approach to the work. And by positionality, I mean nationality, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality.

Dr. José Causadias:

Yeah. Positionality is central to this book because I start with asking the reader to think about their positionality at the beginning of the book and I ask them to do the same at the end. And I saved my positionality for the end of the book. That is inspired by other books that I read that try to include that at the end (see Racial Innocence by Tanya Kateri Hernandez).

I was not trained to think about positionalityI never learned about positionality in grad school at the University of Minnesota or in anything in my scientific training. Because in psychology, traditionally, you are trained in my experience to erase yourself, to be "objective." And if you bring your own self, you're polluting the integrity of the work and being biased. But positionality I know now is a strength. Positionality is about openness and frankness, and it can help the reader understand where you're coming from.

And it's about gaining trust from the academic community and the community in general that you are aware of who you are and where you are historically, politically, racially. So my positionality as a voluntary immigrant who is privileged to say, "I'm going to go study in the US," as a white Panamanian, as someone who has a privilege to have an education, as a cisgender man who's straight, all these things I reflect on at the beginning, and that is what shapes the content of the book.

At some point, how do you structure a textbook on justice? You can do it from psychology. I chose to not frame it in psychology. I chose to frame it in terms of the US as I see it. So the first section is on the American Dream, the American nightmare, American culture, and then themes that I felt that resonated with me. All my training has been abot these great white men in history. A lot of my books that I inherited are these great white men in Latin America and in Europe.

So I thought it was necessary to center the perspective of women of color. The next section on law and order, inspired by my own experience in my country being invaded by the US in 1989, the military invasion of my country and seeing the US policing gender, policing borders against immigrants, and then policing health with the attack on Asian Americans and people from Asia. And then finally, the thing I struggled the most was proposing something, and then I was motivated to include these chapters about democracy, this chapter about humanization and about reparations.

But my positionality is throughout the book, it's a deeply subjective book and arbitrary in its structure. But each decision I try to justify it by explaining the urgency that is still to this day, as much things have changed in the last year (2025), we still have a crisis of Black maternal mortality in the US that is urgent. We still have a crisis on missing and murdered Indigenous women.

We have a crisis of people with disabilities being able to participate in democracy. So I feel relieved that the book is not irrelevant with all these changes because these issues keep being pressing, if not more pressing now. But I'm completely honest that this is my perspective as a voluntary immigrant seeing things from a different perspective than someone grew up in the US might.

Salman Safir:

Dr. Causadias, I was curious if you could tell us a little bit more about the form that you took for this text, which is a textbook. And given that you could choose a variety of formats, you intentionally chose this open access form of a textbook. And I'm curious if you could tell us a little bit about what went...

Dr. José Causadias:

Thank you so much. That's a really important question because I believe textbooks don't get enough love in my field. I cannot speak for the whole academia, but you don't see a lot of classes on teaching how to write textbooks, at least in psychology. You don't see a lot of promotion, hiring, or rewards for textbooks or even awards that I know of for textbooks. It's not valued, but they're so important, think about this idea that this is “the textbook definition”. They provide the foundation for students’ learning.

Textbooks play an important role. I have my own experience with textbooks. When I studied psychology in Panama, all the textbooks were written in the US or in English-speaking country. So I never saw myself reflected in them. Also, there's the notion about textbooks that they are not original research.But textbook can have a great impact on the mind of early careers by building the foundations.

And when I started teaching this class on Family, Ethnic, and Cultural Diversity, I saw a lack of literacy and understanding basic issues and understanding cases. So, the key here was how we can have impact on promoting justice and liberation in the US and advancing the well-being of our communities, and textbook seemed the best approach to that.

Open Access is an exercise of coherence. It's not fair. Our students are struggling financially. We have students that don't have enough money to eat, international students that are in precarious situation now, students from poor community, working students, all these types of students, and asking them to pay 50, 40, 70 dollars per textbook.

I think Open Access really takes not only a burden out of the students, but it's a way of saying, "I need to be coherent. This is about justice. We need to make it affordable or open to people." So yeah, I think textbooks are crucial in providing basic literacy that can later be advanced then by more specialized learning tools.

Salman Safir:

I love how you talk about the meaning, the purpose, and the backstory that goes into all of the decisions that you've made in creating this work. And it's something that you can feel as you read it. You can sense that there is this intentionality and thought and care behind it. And you mentioned that this first came to mind in 2017, almost eight, nine years back. And I'm curious how you envision educators using this textbook in today's world and how you see that given where you started and now where we are at.

Dr. José Causadias:

Thank you. That's an excellent question. I want this textbook to reach students directly too. I think the environment that we're witnessing in the US, there's a lot of censorship and self-censorship of issues that have to do with diversity, equity, and inclusion.

And I also hope this book is not mediated by institutions and by teachers, but that students can also reach them directly because it's Open Access. The Open Access component of the book is essential to my positionality because I don't belong to the communities that I write about. And if I would've written a book that is for profit, I feel I would be perpetuating exploitation and the essence of whiteness that is using others.

So I felt like, okay, let's raise funds. Let's make this Open Access. And it's not going to be for profit, but it's subsidized by my institution who was supporting me. So it's a privilege to be able to write Open Access in a way. But I was lucky enough to raise funding from Arizona State University so they can pay Cambridge University Press to make this Open Access. And I hope this gives teachers in the US at the college level tools that can help them engage students where they are.

It can be read from people's phones. The case studies really are the heart of the book. And surprisingly, that's not my idea. Cambridge University Press has a manual for writing textbooks and they encourage the inclusion of case studies. But me learning about storytelling, I hope the case studies resonate with people. The chapter on ableism and democracy is central. Alice Wong, who passed away a few weeks ago, and she was very generous with me.

And I feel very honored that I can include her photo and she gave me permission. So I really feel very grateful that I get these stories, and I hope the stories are the champions of this chapter because they're humanized, as Helen was saying, and I hope teachers and instructors can use the stories to get students excited about some of these topics that might be a little heavy.

Salman Safir:

Thank you so much. And one of the stories that you mentioned in the text, the story of Wamsutta Frank James was one that got my attention. And in chapter three, you talk about a number of important concepts related to culture, power, and erasure. And you discussed the notion of incorporation or the process by which others are accepted into whiteness and the power that this

can bring them. And so this brought to mind the tension that can exist between incorporation and changemaking.

And towards the end of the chapter, you talk about reimagining US culture, and this made me curious as to your reflections on what this reimagination might entail or look like, and particularly how we go about changemaking without relying on incorporation, particularly as we think about a nation state that has established and sustained itself on domination and through domination.

Dr. José Causadias:

This is such a perceptive question, Salman, because you're really getting at the heart of how culture works in the US. And you're touching on something that is very near to the heart of many people, Latin American descent, Latinx in the US, is this sense of unease with our identity and the sense that we have an unstable coalition among Hispanic, Latinx, Latine people in the US. And we see how many vote and engage politically in radically different ways, in some ways that harm our own community.

And I think many scholars have documented this. It has to do with this idea of incorporation. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva wrote about becoming an honorary white, becoming part of this coalition. They want to have the benefits that White people have. So for me, it's like how do we move the needle and how do we raise awareness of why Latinx people of color are doing, why are they voting against their interest?

And I think learning history is one way of having people in my community understand, learning the impact of family separation, how fascism, authoritarianism separates families, how immigrant raids separate families, and how can we reimagine a society centered on liberation, centered on healing, a culture of care, a culture not of productivity or accumulation of things, but on children. US is such a children-adverse country.

And the fact that it doesn't have any policies to support paid maternal leave, the fact that it has so many indicators of poor maternal health, the fact that it doesn't support a queer health rights, I think there's so much we can do to transform US culture. And I think Indigenous people have so much to to teach us. And their diversity, of course. We're not mythologizing indigeneity, but in the case of Frank Wamsutta James or Wamsutta Frank James, this tradition of building community and contesting culture by creating an alternative cultural practice.

And if you read the book, you know that he was invited to give a speech on Thanksgiving and he wrote a speech criticizing Thanksgiving and he was censored. And then he and others created a National Day of Mourning to educate Americans on the meaning of Thanksgiving. And there's research discussed in that chapter about the diversity of Indigenous people, how they experience Thanksgiving differently.

But I think the exercise of taking the perspective of others and understanding what these things that we take as granted mean for people we typically don't know much about. So it's humility, it's learning, and it's centering their perspective on this case of Indigenous people and how they've seen things that are myths of American culture like Thanksgiving.

Helen Neville:

That's powerful. And I really appreciate the ways in which you describe this and interweave Wamsutta Frank James' narrative within this larger historical narrative. And you do that

throughout each of your chapters of the case studies that you present. I'd like to focus on the last part of the book, the part four, where you devote three chapters to collective action as a way to heal and address historical harms.

And you take up questions about dehumanization that occurs through systems of exclusion and oppression. And I think a lot of what you talk about, a lot of these systems, really the purpose of it is to dehumanize us. And there's multiple ways in which dehumanization happens. In chapter 11, in particular, you discuss dehumanization broadly, and I think many of us think we have an idea about what dehumanization is, but we really don't.

So I'm wondering if you could talk about what is dehumanization, particularly as a psychological process. I'm also interested in what does it look like in our society and in what ways can we affirm our shared humanity and what is the link between affirmation of our humanness and liberation?

Dr. José Causadias:

That is a wonderful question. Thank you, Helen. I think we cannot have liberation without humanization. We cannot have reparations without humanization. We cannot have democracy. Because why would you allow animals or objects or mythical creatures to vote? So I think so many of the things that we need require that we first acknowledge people's humanity. And democracy is more than voting, but why would you see people that you don't see as fully human to be part of the political system you want?

Dehumanization fuels ethnic cleansing that we're seeing in the US today. It fuels genocide that we're seeing in Gaza and Palestine today. It fuels the crisis that we have of sexual violence against women worldwide. And dehumanization has been studied in especially social psychology, the approach I take. It's studied in many disciplines, of course, but I rely a lot on the work in social psychology.

Dehumanization has been described by Nick Haslam and other experts as a process of seeing others as less than fully human. So it's not that you don't see Black people, transgender people, immigrants, women as human. It's you see them a little less. They lack some qualities that make humans, humans. What are those qualities? Agency. That every single person, every community, they know what they want.

They have a history. You take away that. You take their uniqueness. You don't see each individual, you think that they're all the same. And you can see that when you look at the three different processes that I described. Animalistic dehumanization is seeing people less than a fully human and more like animals. And there's a lot of research I discussed about seeing them as closer to nature.

They can be romantic animalistic dehumanization that, oh, they really know how to dance. They're connected to nature. We see that in stereotypes about Indigenous, Black, and Latine people. But animalistic dehumanization has to do with lack of culture, lack of sophistication, lack of refinement.

Today I was unpacking some books that I inherited from my father today about world literature in Spanish, and I was putting them in a bookshelf.These books were published in the '80s, '90s. And They are on world literature, European literature, Latin American literature, English literature, North American literature. But they do not includeo African literature. No African literature whatsoever. So there's a global project of dehumanization that is connected to the idea

of racial contract by Charles Mills, of this imposed view of whiteness and white culture that fuels some of the problems that we have today.

Animalistic dehumanization is one example. Mechanistic, treating people like things that serve a purpose, that are there to work, and that is related to sexual identification, capitalism and exploitation of people. Slavery is the textbook example. When we think about textbooks, they're so canonical that we use the expression "a textbook example." The textbook example of mechanistic dehumanization of treating people like things is slavery.

And then I talk about a third type of dehumanization that is mystic dehumanization that has to do with this idea that, well, you're not fully human because you're more than human. You have some powers. And it seems as benevolent from dehumanization, but yet it is. When you see in the movies, Spike Lee has written about this trope in The Green Mile, for instance, of this magical Black person who doesn't have a backstory. He just served the plot of advancing white characters.

Key & Peele had a sketch about this magical Black person and how it's dehumanized because it's just there as a plot device and a narrative mechanism. And the same you can see with a wise, a Native American who has no backstory, no family, is a token in a story. This form of dehumanization can be counter for promoting liberation by emphasizing human uniqueness, that we're all very unique individuals with our real stories, that we're not exchangeable.

Fungibility. We're not exchangeable. With this idea of human agency, the understanding that each community, each individual has a story and a will and liberation cannot be constructed without embracing the will of individuals and communities and finding ways of reconciling them. And this demystifying has to do also with human contact and exchange and developing relations with people from other groups to understand the banality and the normalcy of everyday life despite our differences.

This class on dehumanization and humanness was one of ethe classes that most resonated with students. I think a third or more would say dehumanization when I asked them on the last day of class which topic we discussed resonated with them the most. So what we see today in the world with genocide, what we see with ethnic cleansing, dehumanization is an important mechanism that needs action. We need to go back and see how can we can make interventions that can promote humanization of others, and prevent dehumanization of political rivals, dehumanization of people that we fear.

this topic is very close to my heart, and that chapter is about Carmelita Torres, a teenage Mexican activist who in 1917 led a protest against a bath policy that the US had in El Paso, Texas, forcing Mexican immigrants to take kerosine baths. And she led that revolt. So a lot of the chapter is moving away from deficit models of victimhood and saying, "Latinas and Chicanas have a proud tradition of resisting dehumanization, and liberation goes through collective action and activism that affirms our humanity and our sense of agency in resisting the systems of oppression."

Helen Neville:

Wow! That was incredibly powerful, a real exclamation point. There's so much more that I want to talk about, but I realize that our time is coming to an end. I do encourage our listeners to get the book, Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in the United States. In our show notes, we will include information about how you can either purchase the book or get access to it through the Open Access portal. But at this point, I want to see if there are parting words that you would

like to leave us with, things, either take home messages or things that come to mind as you reflect on our conversation.

Dr. José Causadias:

Well, I'm very appreciative of this opportunity to share this work of love. It's, as I said, a deeply personal take. This textbook is in conversation with other textbooks that I read, but it's a love letter to the people in the US who I admire and feel so much gratitude. It's a love letter to my students. Some of the many chapters were proposed by students. I had students reach out to me when I opened the syllabus.

This is the beauty of democracy. When you open the syllabus, you say, "What do you guys want to learn about? I don't want to infantilize you. What do you want to learn in this class about..." And I only did that after years of teaching and when I felt secure enough. I remember packing my PowerPoints and not leaving space to breathe. And I think that the textbook has a lot of questions, a lot of exercises. I want to let the readers come up with their own conclusions.

What do you think about this event? What do you think about this issue? Oh, you think in American culture this is just important? When was the last time you...? What did you learn in school or in college about the contributions of this group of people? Why not? Why haven't you learned about them?

But I'm deeply grateful to my ASU students. The chapter on ableism was proposed by students. Students asked for a class on COVID-19 and the impact on Asian Americans. The students asked for a class on missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. I knew nothing. So this textbook reflects also the legacy of my students asking for classes that reflect their concerns, and I think we should keep that tradition. We should ask students. And maybe there's chapters from other books when we're putting together a class.

And I think that can be a way of moving forward. What students want to learn about? What our communities want to learn about? And I think when we include those perspectives, there's things that I didn't include that I couldn't, but I hope everyone can find chapters and sections and ideas and cases that can match the learning needs that they have and that the classroom has.

Salman Safir:

Thank you so much, Dr. Causadias, for this whole conversation and that last reflection. Your last reflection really touched upon something that I've just been taking away throughout this conversation about how much ethics and care is involved in your writing, in your work, in your pedagogy, and thinking about who we're writing about, who we're writing to, who we're writing with.

And I think that's just such a valuable way to look at psychology, to look at history, to look at the impact that we want to have on the world. And it's a really motivating... It's a liberatory stance. It's one that inspires some of that hopefulness that you mentioned at the beginning, that possibility of liberation. And the ethics that you talk about, they're so much from the book, but they're also just a part of the book and how it's structured.

You can't see this, but how many tabs I've opened as you've talked about all the stories that you're mentioning. And there's just so much richness here that will give me a chance to learn for so long. So thank you so much for all of these reflections and thoughts.

Helen Neville:

Yeah, I would agree with everything that Salman has said. Thank you so much, Dr. Causadias. I'm just sitting with a lot of gratitude. As I read the book and I'm hearing you talk about it, I mean, you embody cultural humility. You read textbook, just definitions, cultural humility, but you embody it in the sense of this ethical care that Salman talked about, openness to perspectives, a deep commitment to humanizing others, to learning about things, understanding our own shortcomings.

And what I've also taken away is the power of textbooks. And I know that we do not get as an academics rewarded for writing textbooks often. And you had given up even the small little thing that textbooks bring, which is a little bit of money, but you've made this Open Access and free to folks because you understand how transformative knowledge and the importance of knowledge is and how textbooks can help add to liberation.

And I do see this as a wonderful tool to increase folks' critical consciousness, which essentially is an awareness of the core conditions, the root causes of our oppression, humanizing our stories of resistance, motivating us to and scaffolding in how we can make a difference, whether it's within ourselves, in our interpersonal space and within our communities. And so thank you for this gift.

Salman Safir:

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