Carla Shalaby
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Dear Meredith, Jamie and Eliot:

I was invited to offer a short response to your insights, noticings and critiques of my book, Troublemakers, and I hope you won’t mind my addressing you by your first names—and in the form of a letter to you. Though we are, of course, writing for a wider audience than just one another, the core argument of Troublemakers is that we all need to work especially hard to resurrect our capacity for human being, as a verb. That is, these are times that call upon us to sometimes break the rules of institutions and traditions (including those of academic journals and academia more broadly) in favor of resurrecting our capacity to better see, hear, and talk to one another as human beings. So, I want to begin by simply thanking you for reading this book that I gingerly and nervously sent out into the world, and for sharing your reactions to it.

Each of you chose to bring a theoretical lens to your response; Meredith leveraging linguistic frameworks, Jamie using self-determination theory, and Eliot employing literature that reflects a primary commitment to civic and democratic education. The works you each referenced and applied to the arguments in the book were very useful and illuminating. I learned so much from seeing how these perspectives and ideas brought different aspects of the book to the forefront, pushing other views and insights to the background. To me, that’s what our choice of theory does. Like every other decision we make as researchers, our choice of theory is a subjective one that helps to highlight some points and obscure others.

Meredith rightfully notices that Troublemakers is not explicit about certain things typically described in scholarly work, including methodology, theoretical framing, and research questions. Troublemakers did begin as a dissertation and, as such, included chapters on all of these things. But once I was finally out of academia, at least insofar as being done with life as a graduate student—which took me ten years!—I had the very freeing realization that turning Troublemakers into a book was an opportunity for me to make some decisions of my own about who the book was for and why I was writing it.

Writing a book for a wide world is an opportunity and a choice.
Carla Shalaby

I chose to write the book for children, including the four featured who are now old enough to read the book on their own. Several readers have shared with me that they have read the portrait chapters with their own children at home, as young as seven years old, and that each of these children has been able not only to understand the book but also to recognize in it their own friends, their own peers, their own firsthand experiences.

I chose to write the book for the parents and step-parents and grandparents, the aunts and uncles and cousins who are raising troublemakers, who are doing battle with schools over these freedom-fighting children, and who are looking for a book that might say to them—for once—that their children are perfect. Perfectly imperfect, like all of us human beings.

And I chose to write the book for teachers, the everyday people raising our public in these institutions we call “school.” The teachers who are interested in theory will no doubt do what you all did, applying what they know and what they’ve read to make sense of the narratives and analysis I’ve offered in the book.

Would this have been possible if the book was more traditionally academic or theoretical?

Researchers often comment that the book is lacking in theory, and teachers often comment that the book is lacking in practice—things to do or try tomorrow in classrooms. The book is likely somewhat lacking in both because it’s an attempt to sit at a fairly unpopular intersection of theory and practice, art and science. It is both research and narrative. And being both means, perhaps, being not enough of either. But that all depends on the perspective of the reader, and I am increasingly dissatisfied by books about education that are written with very narrow audiences in mind. Books for teachers too often erase all signs of research, and books for researchers are often too dense to reach people who actually work with children. Troublemakers is an attempt to break with both of those traditions, both of those genres.

On a related note, all three of you referenced the larger context of standards-based reform, and the way this most recent wave of policy constrains teachers, school leaders, and children. I only nod to that context in the book, for a couple of reasons. First, the history of American schooling long precedes this most immediate context, and it has its roots in the desire and effort to assimilate diverse immigrants and indigenous Peoples into an Anglo, Protestant, middle-class cultural way of being. That is the larger context that I most saliently bring to bear in Troublemakers, because standards-based reform is but the most recent iteration of policy efforts to ignore difference in favor of conformity with whiteness.

Keeping this conformity-driven context in mind that often stifles, and too frequently harms, young people, Troublemakers is an attempt to break with traditions of academic conformity that also too frequently stifle and harm our writing. You have each very accurately noted the strengths, constraints, and drawbacks of that humble attempt. And since I know you are all recently graduated from your own doctoral programs, you
too are faced with a multitude of decisions about what to write, who to write for, and why to write. You are no longer constrained by graduation requirements. I hope your analyses of the choices I made in *Troublemakers* support you to think about your own future directions, with my challenge to you and to all others in academia to pause, and to reflect, on why we do what we do and how to make sure our work is able to reach those with the most power to change our schools—young people, their families, and their teachers.

**Author**

**Carla Shalaby** is a researcher of teaching and teacher education. Her professional and personal commitment is to education as the practice of freedom, and her research centers on cultivating and documenting daily classroom work that protects the dignity of every child and honors young people’s rights to expression, to self-determination, and to full human being. Specifically, she is interested in practices of critical pedagogy and critical literacy at the elementary level; classroom community and "management" as the practice of democracy; and the relationships between the daily work of teachers and the ongoing struggle for justice. Carla holds a B.A. in English from Rutgers College, an M.Ed. in Elementary Education from the Rutgers Graduate School of Education, and an M.A. and Ed.D. in Culture, Communities, and Education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

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