

“IT WAS LIKE HAVING THE ROOTS PULLED OUT FROM UNDERNEATH YOUR FEET”: *CURRERE* AND POST-DISASTER SCHOOL CLOSURES IN NEW ZEALAND

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SETTING THE SCENE

In 2010 and 2011, the city of Christchurch and surrounding district of Canterbury, New Zealand, was hit by a series of powerful earthquakes that caused over 40 billion dollars of damage including 1200 inner city buildings and 120,000 homes and businesses. The disaster killed 185 people and injured thousands more. It was unprecedented in New Zealand’s recent history. Schools came to the fore. They became shelters for homeless or distressed community members. They were hubs for disaster relief, emergency supplies, and a range of support services. School principals and teachers came to school every day, despite their own personal and material losses. Schools continued to care for students, parents, and their wider communities throughout the years that followed without complaint. While the many selfless acts of first responders and emergency personnel have been widely recognized, no-one has taken the time to officially recognize the roles of schools in assisting the city as it recovered from these traumatic events.

The New Zealand school system has only two administrative layers: a centralised Ministry of Education that determines education policy, funding, curriculum, and assessment; and de-centralized school boards of trustees, elected by the community, that manage individual schools. Schools have high levels of autonomy over staffing, programs, resourcing, and day-to-day decision making. Following the earthquakes, the government appointed a new minister and set up a centralized authority to manage the city’s recovery, ignoring the views of local councils and citizens. Following the lead of earthquake recovery authority, the Minister and Ministry of Education took full control of the process of managing the recovery of the schooling sector, again ignoring the views of those most affected. The consequences of their lack of concern is what prompted the story that follows.

MY STORY

Since 2012, I have been researching and writing about the experience of schools in the context of the 2010-2011 Canterbury earthquakes that devastated my city of Christchurch and surrounding regions in New Zealand. Initially, I thought that I would engage in qualitative interviews and arts-based activities, make sense of the findings, write them up, and move on. How naïve. Anyone who has lived through a major disaster knows that it changes your world—physically and metaphorically—forever. Life, and your view of life, is never the same. I became embedded in the lives and worlds of my participants as we floundered chaotically through the weeks, months, and years ahead. While some of the school projects—an illustrated book, a video documentary, and a community mosaic—were completed, other schools became caught up in the school closure plan. As the researcher on the ground, I became a first-

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hand observer of a process that seemed incomprehensible. Writing academic articles about these experiences gave me a purpose, a passion, and a measure of distance from the events. The discipline of writing to a journal's specifications and addressing the reviewers' comments meant that I could bury my own personal emotions—sorrow, fear, anger, and frustration. It was a great distraction. One day, I knew that the time would come when I would need to tell it as it was, as it is, and as it seems that it might continue to be.

In 2017, an official report on the mismanaged process of post-earthquake school closures gave me the courage to break away from my academic voice and write several opinion pieces. The floodgates opened, but it was unclear where I could find space to tell these stories and how I would find an audience that would understand that my story is not just a retelling of events specific to this context, but an insight into bigger issues of power, silence, and justice. I sought a venue/process that would let the voices of everyone involved speak for themselves and allow me to do so with integrity and rigour, yet be free of stifling academic conventions. I had recently become aware of “mash-up” (O'Connor, 2017), a method where strands of text from different sources are interwoven to provide a dissonance that challenges taken-for-granted readings of complex themes. But, that, alone, was not an ideal fit for how I wanted to tell my story, which has its own narrative structure—a beginning, a middle, and an end. Adding the method of *currere* (Pinar, 1994) helped me find a way of writing myself into the story without detracting from the narrative. The steps of “regressive-progressive-analytical-synthetical” (Pinar, 1994, p.19) resonated with the way my story was evolving as I pulled together material from my data and other sources. It would allow me to keep the emotions intact and the voices authentic.

As I selected and organized the pieces of text that would tell the story, four distinct voices emerged. I label these: *intrapersonal*—the voice of the author (me); *personal*—the voices of those affected (research participants); *interpersonal*—the voices of observers and commentators; and *impersonal*—disembodied documents and press statements from the Minister or Ministry of Education. In the text below, as I share the collective stories, each of these voices is displayed in a different font and on different locations on the page to make clear who is speaking, as follows:

Intrapersonal – the voice of the author

Personal – the voices of those affected

Interpersonal – the voices of observers and commentators

Impersonal – statements from the Minister or Ministry of Education

I begin with regressive—returning to the past—where my story begins with the earthquakes themselves. I move to the progressive stage where we begin by dreaming of a possible future, but our dreams soon turn to nightmares. In the analytical stage, I describe the way the nightmares become a lived reality. In the synthetical stage, I juxtapose past, present, and future to show that there is hope for reconciliation and a way forward. Each piece of text is drawn from a now published source—my own articles and opinion pieces, findings and reports from other researchers, media and

public commentary, and official documents. Statements from research participants are all from my own data except for those marked with an asterisk, which come from Duncan (2016). Rather than in-text references, footnotes, or endnotes, which might interrupt the flow of the narrative, I have briefly indicated the source at the end of each quote and have acknowledged the collective sources in an appendix at the end of the essay.

**"IT WAS LIKE HAVING THE ROOTS PULLED OUT FROM UNDERNEATH YOUR FEET":
THE NARRATIVE**

REGRESSIVE – RETURNING TO THE PAST

All of a sudden, a huge earthquake struck. I tried to crawl away, but the earthquake threw me back down again. They always say that your life flashes before your eyes before you die, and I was waiting for that to happen. (Student)

I felt the floor come up under me, and immediately, I just dived under my desk, and I had my head right in the corner near the wall, and I closed my eyes very tightly, and from then on, I have a memory block, and I don't remember anything else except a vague sort of sound and then silence... (School office administrator)

On 4 September 2010, at 4:35am, an earthquake of magnitude 7.1 struck Christchurch and the surrounding Canterbury region.... The September earthquake was followed by four other major earthquakes occurring on Boxing Day 2010; and 22 February, 13 June, and 23 December 2011. Of these, the event on February 22 was by far the most serious, resulting in 185 deaths. (Canterbury Earthquakes Royal Commission)

...my thoughts now, when I look back, is that the whole place could have fallen in. We were so jolted that we stood up; then we were jolted back down, the force was so great.... We tried to stand and go forward, but we were just knocked back...the lights went out, and the children were screaming. All I remember is the siren noise, and I went and grabbed a few of the Year 4 children out of the [swimming] pool, and I just huddled with them. (Teacher)

Our house—it's broken—liquefaction [silt] everywhere. We only stayed in Christchurch for two days because we had no power, sewerage, or water. We cleaned up the liquefaction. The neighbours got together and cleaned up the front yards. (Parent)

My research into Christchurch schools following the 2010-2011 Canterbury earthquakes showed that schools went above and beyond the call of duty. On the day of the February earthquake, they rescued, evacuated, calmed, and cared for children all across the city, despite the fears they had for their own families. Schools became community relief and drop-in centres. When schools were up and running again in repaired and relocated classrooms, church halls, and tents, teachers and principals turned up every day to support children and their families despite the turmoil in their own lives. (Author)

We had to wait until all the parents had picked up the children. I had one girl in my class whose mum didn't come for a very long time.... When the mother

arrived, she was in a real state...in tears and red-faced and she was like: "The Cathedral's gone; there are people dead in the streets." That was like the moment of reality. (Teacher)

Our house was pretty much written off from the September [2010] quake. We had a huge amount of liquefaction and the house sank and tipped.... Then, we had the February [2011] shake, and that turned us to toast really. We found out in that April that we were red-zoned [for demolition], and we would have to move—and that was ok, you dealt with it, you just dealt with it. And, we had the June earthquake—all these produced huge amounts of liquefaction; the house tipped a bit more and sank a bit more. (School support staff)

Half of them [students] didn't come back, of course, because some of them had shifted away. Some of them were too scared to come back. Some parents were too scared to let their children come back, so there were a whole lot of different reasons why we didn't have our normal cohort. (Principal)

When Canterbury was struck by a severe earthquake at 12:51pm on 22 February 2011, staff in the education sector in the region rose to the challenges presented with great professionalism, courage, and calmness. (Education Review Office)

Obviously, we kept on feeding kids; we've always done that to a certain extent, but that became more evident. There were kids without lunches; there were kids without breakfast; we just fed them as the need arose. Kids were really tired, so we would put cushions in the back of the room for them to sleep. (Principal)

I had a teacher with her house on the hill in Sumner [an area badly damaged in February]. I had a teacher who was in the red zone [cordoned off from the public] who for a good part of a year didn't have a toilet [as sewers were damaged, shared, portable toilets were provided on the streets] and, in the end, didn't have a house. She had to leave. That starts to wear down the staff, so we knew we had to look after each other. We really had to look out for each other...be prepared, watch the signs—"This teacher is not going to be at school tomorrow. I can just tell; she's looking shaky." (Principal)

Teachers, that's the interesting part, straight after February, teachers rallied round. Teachers are great. I can't say enough about how much strength, how much integrity, how much they would go the extra mile to drop kids off, to look after kids in their classrooms after school, to buy them special treats, take them to McDonalds, all those sorts of things...to find clothes for them, to find a pram for a mother who didn't have a pram to wheel her baby to school... (Principal)

All these teachers are quiet heroes. I know there are teachers here that have lost their homes, and some of them are living in the same situation as we are, and they come to work, and they get on with it. They do their job as best they can, and they never, ever show their frustration to the kids. (Parent)

PROGRESSIVE – DREAMING OF A POSSIBLE FUTURE

But, it's 10-20 years, they say, before we'll really see it completed. A long time. I say to these kids, "You're going to be 30, I suppose," and they go, "Wow!" And, I think that realization surprises them. What a different life for them. (Teacher)

Education renewal for greater Christchurch is about meeting the needs and aspirations of children and young people. It is not just about revitalising infrastructure but also enhancing education outcomes. (Minister of Education's press release)

*Initially, we thought the Government and MoE [Ministry of Education] were genuinely engaging in blue skies thinking on how they would reform the current schooling system to something better. (Principal)**

The extent of damage and on-going impact of people movement in the wake of the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes mean it cannot be restored to the way it was. We need to accept in areas that have been depopulated we will have to do things differently, which will inevitably mean some change to services. The viability of existing individual schools and increased demand for new schools are a key consideration going forward. (Ministry of Education)

On September the 14th, 2012, announcements were made about the re-organisation of Christchurch schools. Although this was expected, the presentation of the proposals as a "good news story" in a large public meeting, without any regard for the distress school closures cause, was simply inept. (Teacher union)

We knew by watching events unfold in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina that ruthless bureaucrats could take advantage of disoriented and dislocated communities to fulfil their own agendas—what Naomi Klein (2007) calls the "shock doctrine." It seemed incomprehensible that our bureaucrats would go as far as to fire every teacher, as happened in New Orleans. Surely, something like that could never happen here. Imagine my disbelief when I heard about the colored labels that principals were given to wear to denote whether their schools were to be "restored," "consolidated," or "rejuvenated"—bureaucrat-speak for saved, amalgamated, or closed. Could this really be happening? Isn't the Ministry in the process of consultation about 21st century schools? Aren't we going to build back better? (Author)

*The meeting at Lincoln (Events Centre) was vile, starting with some principals and BoTs [Boards of Trustees] getting a phone call 24-hours before the meeting to advise them to be there.... This began a cycle of anxiety and helplessness for many. It was a time of winners and losers. Then, the ludicrous colored card system at the meeting added to the farce. It was an awful start to the process. (Principal)**

Unfortunately, the media leaked it before [we were told]. People were texting me. They texted me at work. Friends said, "Oh, the school is closing." But, we hadn't heard that as a school, as staff. (Teacher)

The Government has recognised the importance of re-establishing the education network as a response to the Canterbury earthquakes. The Government's objectives are wider than just rebuilding damaged school properties. It recognises that education renewal is fundamental to develop the skills to ensuring a growing economy. (Ministry of Education business case)

The recent schools proposals continue to confirm the top down approach from your Government toward Christchurch. Schools are going to be savaged with these proposals. It began with pretend consultation, falsely based claims, and wildly inappropriate solutions to problems. The Minister and Ministry of Education appear to be totally out of touch with what is happening in this city, with no consideration for communities and the real people they will affect in announcing these destructive proposals. (Opposition politicians)

[I was] worried. I was just sick in my stomach thinking, okay, what is it saying about jobs? What is it saying about my child's school; other children's schools?... There wasn't enough information given out at the time for you not to think about what does this mean for you, for your future. I mean, we're already living in house waiting to be repaired, and we're going to lose my job now, and my child's going to lose their school. There was just not enough information to allay those fears at that time. (Teacher)

Yet, prior to the earthquakes the educational situation across greater Christchurch was not perfect. Inequalities existed; a disproportionate number of Māori and Pasifika young people left school early with few qualifications, never to return to education or training. School leaver attainment in greater Christchurch lagged behind that of Auckland and Wellington. (Ministry of Education)

Of all the mishaps in education this year, the Christchurch school plan was the most telling. To read the plan was to see a ministry utterly out of touch with the people its schools are supposed to serve. The earthquakes had left a number of schools damaged and some of their communities decimated. Some closures would be required. But, not nearly as many as the ministry decided. When its officials sat down to make a recovery plan for the city, someone decided it was a heaven-sent opportunity to refashion schooling as we know it. (Newspaper editorial)

And, the rules kept changing. Schools never knew if they would be next. They thought they were safe because they had enough students to be viable—but that number changed. Decisions were made and then completely overturned, while other decisions were challenged at the highest level, yet it made no difference. Schools tried every avenue open to them—one student even wrote a letter to the Queen, but still, the juggernaut rolled on. In hindsight, it appears as if the Ministry were playing a game of divide and rule. If each school was so busy looking after its own interests—to remain open or overturn a closure decision—then the city's schools as whole could not come together *en masse* and challenge the process. (Author)

My younger son had even written a letter to the Queen. He was not going to go just to John Key [Prime Minister], who he blamed for the whole merger. He was going to the top. He thought, well the Queen is in charge of the countries of the Commonwealth, so he wrote to her to ask if she could help. And, of course, she wrote back and said that she couldn't interfere.... He was sure his letter would stop the merger from going ahead. And, it didn't. So, for a little while he took it quite, quite hard. (Parent)

Schools are often called the “social glue” of their communities. They provide a sense of identity and social cohesion through good times and bad. Several decades ago, Trevor Mallard’s [former Minister of Education] infamous network reviews closed many small, rural, and town schools leaving social and emotional scars that are still visible. It would seem insensitive in this day and age to take a community traumatized by natural disaster and subject them to similar damage. (Author)

[I was] very angry.... I actually came to the school as well. So, it's a family history...it was part of my personal history as well as my children's...then, all of a sudden, they said, "Well, no, this is going as well." So, yeah, it was like having the roots pulled out from underneath your feet. (Parent)

Communities were already coping with the aftermath of the earthquakes. Schools provide a much-needed community focal point. It is almost beyond comprehension that this process was initiated at such a stressful and uncertain time. (Human Rights Commission)

ANALYTIC – THE LIVED REALITY

Everybody making decisions for us...and that happened to me in my job and to the schools. It's now happened to the children in the schools. Everyone is deemed to think that they know better for everybody in Christchurch. (Teacher)

At the time, it appeared that the Ministry were merely incompetent, but the latest Ombudsman’s report reveals that they had, as schools suspected, a hidden agenda—an agenda that they pushed through in the most cruel and heartless way, in a city that was already reeling from disaster. (Author)

If there's one thing I could have said to Hekia Parata [Minister of Education], it's that she has absolutely no idea what she has put in place. I understand that it has to happen. I fully understand, but the timing—if people had been more settled, if things had been better at home, kids would have coped a lot better with the changes that were going to happen. (Parent)

The Government’s Education Renewal Plan led to the closure and merger of several Christchurch schools at a most difficult time for families. The learning from our experience is that consideration must be given to allow damaged communities a breathing space before introducing further change. (Child Poverty Action Group)

It's the cumulative things we are dealing with. People have got so many responsibilities; so much is going on, and the big decisions are just not under our

control. A teacher's performance has to be affected. It is not possible to carry on being the person of usual, everyday circumstances. (Teacher)

At the outset, the Ministry made little effort to gather correct information to make their decisions. Schools were told decisions would be based on whether land was prone to liquefaction [silting], it was uneconomic to repair the buildings, or if rolls were dropping. Decisions were made that bore no relation to these criteria or were made using completely inaccurate data. When schools provided correct information, they were ignored. Looking across the city, decisions seemed incomprehensible and unfair. (Author)

*The whole rationale for our closure given by the MoE, [was] based on three points: a non-viable roll (ours was 340); all 15 buildings earthquake damaged (we had a report stating damage minor and superficial); and that our land was substantially damaged (we took away 2 car trailer loads of liquefaction). [It] was, at best, errors of fact, at worst, a political decision trying to justify the desire to build a new Year 1–13 community campus in this low decile, Labour-held area. (Principal)**

Some schools began to get a sense that something was wrong when they were provided with conflicting responses or when information was deliberately withheld or later retracted. They sought information through the Official Information Act but were told by the Ministry to stop. In 2012, the Ombudsman's Office found the Ministry had acted wrongly by withholding information and telling principals they were not to use the Official Information Act. Still, the closures and mergers went ahead. (Author)

*Where to start! MoE staff tried to hide information from us. Staff in Wellington would tell us one thing and then retract it later. Information was stated and then denied later. Dishonest and deceptive. (Principal)**

Schools and parents should not have to ferret out information by making official information requests. They should be presented with the relevant information in a comprehensive and comprehensible form so that they can participate effectively in the consultation process. (Office of the Ombudsman)

*Twenty-eight other primary schools smaller than mine remained open. A significant number of schools with structural damage far in excess of my school remained open. Schools requiring some land remediation remained open when we, with minimal damage, closed. (Principal)**

We now know that many of the closures and mergers went ahead despite consultation, submissions, protests, and legal action. (Author)

*My community were blind-sided when we received the news that we were to close. It simply didn't make sense. Initially, it was explained that the reasons were due to roll decline and building and land damage. When we contested this and engaged lawyers, the MoE agreed that closure was happening to allow a new concept of schooling to open. (Principal)**

Essentially, while schools and communities were engaging in what they thought was a genuine discussion about broad future visions for schooling in Canterbury, the Ministry was progressing a business case with detailed plans for individual schools. (Office of the Ombudsman)

The recently released Ombudsman's report has found that the process was mismanaged and caused stress to already traumatised communities. This could possibly be excused in a tumultuous, post-disaster environment, but what the Ombudsman's report revealed, most importantly, was that the Ministry had a hidden agenda. They were making their own plans—regardless of the outcome of consultation with schools. Consultation was a cover. This was our own "shock doctrine." Schools and communities in post-earthquake Christchurch were treated with contempt. As one principal remarked, "In military terms, we are just collateral damage." (Author)

If you looked at the stress-related illnesses since the earthquake—the number of parents that have had cancer, heart attacks, brain tumours—it's horrendous. And, we're all dealing with that as well as everything else. There's been some very sad stories at school—we lost a staff member from a stress-related heart attack—it's just been one thing after another for this community. (Teacher)

They were so positive. I mean the teachers were going through more themselves about the whole merger and how it was going to work. They all had to apply for their jobs and all the rest of it. And yet, they were so positive with the children. They did their best to make sure that, when the merger occurred, the children had a positive view of the whole thing. So, I take my hat off to the teachers because they were going through so much too...—the earthquake, the merger, the uncertainty... (Parent)

SYNTHETIC – JUXTAPOSING PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

It's like a village here; there's so many people, and it's the history of the school. It goes back so far—to wipe that out, it's just shocking—no account was taken of the community. It was all just financial. It was short-sighted decision making because, surprisingly, our roll hasn't dropped as far as what they thought it would. (School support staff)

School closures and mergers are decisions that have a major impact not just on the affected staff, pupils, and parents, but on the whole communities in which the schools are based. Therefore, effective consultation is of utmost importance. I think that it is necessary to define what and when information should be released proactively to ensure that a proper, informed, and fair consultation is held. (Office of the Ombudsman)

They had all the [closing] school history around [the walls], and you could read it. There were lots of people who had been there who had gone to school 50 years ago. They came back.... I think just to know that there are other people who went to [the closing] school too and that it's not just us who are feeling sad. (Student)

How does that affect the staff? The emotional ties and the relationships are torn apart; families that have been associated with the school for decades have gone. That kind of link and historical connection and knowledge of the community

and the school and its involvement goes as well. History goes; it travels with the people. (Principal)

I am grateful to the Ombudsman for bringing these matters to public attention. But, the Office of the Ombudsman had already drawn our attention to problems with the process in 2013, along with schools themselves, their lawyers, the media, teacher unions, principals' associations, and the Human Rights Council. Despite much evidence showing the social and emotional damage the closures and mergers would do, they went ahead with speed. They were rushed through before communities could fully comprehend what was happening. In one case, a school closed and merged with a nearby school only to find themselves back on their old, condemned premises the following year because there was not room for them on the new school site. (Author)

We all got to ring this old bell that had been there since the school started about 140 years ago (Student); To clear the memories...to get them all out and make new ones. (Student)

Ministry apology to Christchurch schools affirms what parents, teachers always knew (Newspaper headline)

The report recommends that the Ministry publicly apologize to schools and communities through the local press and work with education sector groups to develop a stronger and more effective engagement process around school closures and mergers. (Office of the Ombudsman)

Yes, finally someone has acknowledged what Christchurch schools, their communities, and their supporters have known all along—that the post-quake school closure and merger process was insensitive, poorly managed, and underhand. (Author)

They deserved better. We let them down, and we are sorry. We know this undermined trust and confidence in us, as the Ombudsman's school closures report confirms.... We apologise for any distress that this caused parents, students, teachers, leaders, and their communities.... We didn't set out to mislead or to keep people in the dark, but the result was that we weren't as transparent as we should have been. (Ministry of Education's chief executive)

The Ministry of Education has apologised to Canterbury schools and communities for their handling of school mergers and closures after the 2011 earthquakes. The apology comes after a scathing Ombudsman report called *Disclosure*, which found significant flaws in the way the ministry engaged with the school community during the reorganisation. (Newspaper report)

The recent report highlights the deeply flawed nature of the process. Schools were pawns in a bigger game. They were already reeling from the impact of the disaster, and instead of being supported, they were deceived. (Author)

Vindication for Christchurch schools and their communities (Online news headline)

This was not a benign process. Harm was done. It cannot be undone. We hope that current and future ministers and ministries learn from these mistakes. We cannot let this happen again. Our schools are the hubs of their communities. They undertake tireless service on behalf of society. They should be valued, supported, and celebrated. (Author)

Bit of a cliché, but if you picture the Hindenburg crashing and the very famous commentary where the man on the radio cries out, "Oh the humanity!" This is exactly another moment in history where I would exclaim, "Oh the humanity!" because, in the bigger picture, there are more schools and more communities that are going to go through this... (Principal)

AFTERWORD

The words are written. The tears have flowed. While I can never put the experiences to rest completely, I can breathe more freely for a while. The *currere* process enabled me to "bring the past to the present" (Pinar, 1994, p. 24). It enabled me to examine a problem that was both "temporal and conceptual in nature" (Pinar, 1994, p. 19) and to reconcile some of the tensions and contradictions that have plagued me since I started on this research journey.

The *currere* process has pushed me to look both inwards and outwards. The four stages of regressive, progressive, analytical, and synthetical gave me a reflective framework by which I could examine the events—and my personal responses to them. By juxtaposing the different voices, including my own, I could look inwards and begin to incorporate the story into my personal disaster narrative. Baszile's interpretation of *currere* as a "meaning making process" (2015, p. 120) resonates with my inward-looking stance—a "mindful inquiry through which one can harness the power of contemplation, reflection, introspection, and imagination" (2017, p. vii).

By writing down my narrative, by making it a "story," I could give it a life of its own. I could step back and view it more objectively. This helped me to look outwards, to see the events in a wider context, to see the school closure process for what it was—and give it a name—"symbolic violence" (Bourdieu, 1979). Symbolic violence. It has a name. Now that it has a name, it can be explained, it can be challenged, and it can be transformed. I can be transformed.

Baszile (2015) notes that *currere*

... is not necessarily the work of writing biography; that is to say that it does not have to result in the stories of one's life written or spoken for a public. The hope is that it does bring about self-transformation and as such will shape one's public work toward justice. (p. 125)

I'll leave the final words to one of the principals I worked with on the project, with whom I still catch up for coffee and a chat:

I have read the article, and it made me cry. Simple as that. Can't say more on the impact. (Principal)

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Appendix: Sources unnamed in the text

Each of the statements in the narrative section of this article has been published in either my own work or publicly accessible documents (except for the final sentence of the essay, which is in the form of personal correspondence). I acknowledge them all below.

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