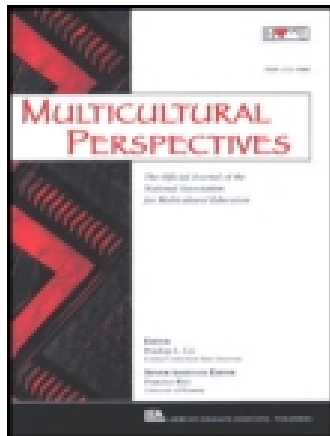


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Scholar-Activism: A Twice Told Tale

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Scholar-Activism: A Twice Told Tale

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What does it mean for individuals to intentionally see themselves as scholar-activists? Moreover, what does navigating a scholar-activist life mean for scholars in the early phases of their academic careers? As emerging scholar-activists the authors of this article are continuing to grapple with these questions, and in this article they present their distinct but overlapping stories of working through and overcoming the false separation of scholarship and activism. By sharing their stories the authors want to both provide readers an opportunity to find resonance in their experiences, and present some points to consider as we all define and live scholar-activism. Scholar-activism is historically situated with sights on the future. The authors have chosen to join the struggle of their predecessors in their scholar-activist work, exploring new possibilities sparked by the confluence of different generations.

Making Academia More of Our Home by Daiyu Suzuki

Writing this article about activism and scholarship has required me to ask painful, ontological questions, to look into my own insufficiencies and privileges, and to find peace in the moment when the forces of the moral, the political, and “the real” are pulling me in various directions. Much of what I write stems from ongoing conversations with my dear “comrade,” Barbara Madeloni, and my mentor, Maxine Greene, who both continue to embody the answers to my questions surrounding scholarship and activism.

Arriving in the United States in 2008, fully funded with a Fulbright Scholarship, I was determined to finish my doctoral study at Columbia in four years and return

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to Japan. As a former middle school teacher who taught ESL and coached baseball for seven years, I wanted to use Columbia’s prestige to earn a voice in Japan to improve the lowering social status of public school teachers there.

However, I soon realized how the discourse of standards and accountability was promoting deprofessionalization of teaching by truncating teaching and trivializing teachers in the United States, too. Inspired by the worldwide protests of 2011 as well as 93-year-old Maxine Greene, whose teaching assistant I became and who continued to teach me and others the possibilities of *social imagination* (Greene, 1995), I embarked on various forms of activism to resist the corporate takeover of education in this country. With the help of some friends and many renowned scholars, I created a network of educators called Edu4, organized scholars to support the opt-out movement in New York, organized action-oriented symposia in four cities, participated in Occupy DOE as a speaker, protested Arne Duncan in reclaimAERA, helped organize Reclaiming the Conversation on Education, and organized with others a student protest against the president of my own institution for her troubling partnership with Pearson.

Because I know at the bottom of my heart that there is no waste in what I have been doing for the past three years, I hate to acknowledge my own hesitation in saying that I am a sixth year doctoral student. I’m still here because, unfortunately, the institution does not “count” my activism because it lies outside of the doctoral coursework and dissertation. Of course, I did not embark on activism to get credits for my degree. Still, I was troubled to see that the enormous time and effort I spent on activism was, to my institution, just a blank. What does it mean to be educated in this society, I asked myself.

Every day, I live with ontological questions that challenge my effort to reconcile my activism, doctoral study, and family life: How will I support my family next year? How do I justify my time away from family? Is it

worth it? Are not my activities made possible only by the generous scholarships? What is so scholarly about my activism?

To me, the fact that activism in scholarship becomes the focus of a journal issue itself represents the paralysis that plagues our education academy today. It not only reveals the insufficiency of activism in scholarship but also speaks to the false separation of the two. In an ideal academia, this would not even be an issue because scholarship and activism would be one and the same, together composing a cyclical process of learning and social interventions for the betterment of the world. In an ideal world, we would not even have the word “activist,” because living attentively to social injustices and seeking ways to address them would be considered a natural part of living as human beings.

But this problem is neither new nor unique to the field of education. Thomas Hayden, a founder of Students for a Democratic Society, said the following in 1962 (as cited in Greene, 1973, p. 50): “Do not wish to be a student in contrast to being a man. Do not study as a student, but as a man who is alive and who cares.” Implied in Hayden’s quote are various separations: between being a student and being a human being; between studying in the university and living as a citizen; between becoming educated and developing the capacity to care. Half a century later, these separations remain strong, and I find myself struggling in the gulf of these artificial either/ors. I am trying to make sense of what it means to become educated in this society, and it is not easy.

I am reminded of the AERA Presidential Address that Maxine (Greene, 1982) gave one year before *Nation at Risk*. In it, she warned scholars of the increasing anti-democratic forces of neoliberalism and buoyed a thousand scholars to teach while reminding them of who they are: “But we are educators, and education has to do with new beginnings and reaching toward what is not yet” (p. 4). In doing so, she urged them to create public spaces where “alienation and fixity give way to participation and movement, the free play of movement, the free play of thought, all for the sake of the common world” (p. 9).

This notion of scholars as educators profoundly troubles the image of the contemporary scholar, for whom research comes first and teaching second. As a graduate student, I have heard repeatedly that one’s survival in the academy depends on her publication productivity and not so much on her quality as an educator. What is this division between research and teaching? True, research could be considered as one way of teaching. But, seeing the enormous publication pressure on junior scholars, I wonder if it is even possible for them to write, not for the sake of accountability for their jobs, but for the sake of their responsibility to teach.

As I reflect on my activism, I realize how it has largely been about building an activist community among scholars and finding “home” for others and myself who felt estranged from the academia. Most importantly, though, I feel as though it has been a process for us to be reminded of what it means to be human beings. We have spent a lot of time listening to each other, resonating and pushing back, feeling excited, vulnerable, and disappointed, celebrating small moments of victory, and experiencing “what it means to be alive among others” (Greene, 1988). It was Barbara who taught me how our collective “professional” identity often polices our behaviors and silences us. Over time, I have come to realize that the true challenge was not really about getting scholars to embark on scholarly activism but humanizing academia and reminding ourselves to act as educated human beings.

Over time, I have come to realize that the true challenge was not really about getting scholars to embark on scholarly activism but humanizing academia and reminding ourselves to act as educated human beings.

Such reflections make me think that what synthesizes scholarship and activism is recognition of our own privileges and responsibilities that demand us to teach. It also makes me realize that it is not that we want the academia to “count” our activism within its pre-existing value system, but that *we* need to make our own activism count by making the academia more of our home.

Navigating the Borderlands of Scholar-Educator-Activism by Edwin Mayorga

What is it to live in the borderlands of “scholar-educator-activism,” and how does one effectively navigate spaces and institutions that are already “structured in dominance” (Hale, 1980)? Our actions are mediated, historical, and inextricable from the milieu in which it is carried out. As a U.S. born, straight, abled, working class male, child of Nicaraguan/Nicaraguan-Chinese immigrants, my entire life has been about being in in-between space. Living and struggling within the *nepantla/borderlands* (Anzaldúa, 1987) is my way of understanding that our lives are not solely of our making but a reflection of how we navigate multiple worlds as

we respond to the fatal couplings of power and difference (Gilmore, 2002).

Scholar-educator-activism is in us, but it emerges when we recognize injustice and move to act. During secondary school, and more so during university, I became aware of the comparatively inadequate education I received. I wondered why these inequalities existed and how I could respond. At the same time I was coming to believe that education had the potential of being a transformative force in imagining and materializing a more democratic, anti-oppressive world. It was a call to name and challenge what was oppressive, and thinking about the transformative potential of education, that brought out a hunger to be a scholar-educator-activist.

As a teacher, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, the shift to a mayor-controlled city school system, and increased testing, among other recent reforms, were a noticeable shift in the state's way of addressing education crisis. These reforms fell in line with what critical scholars have described as market-centered, or neoliberal, movements (Lipman, 2011).

In my classroom I was seeing the stresses of testing take its toll on my students and me, as scores became the center of teaching and learning to the detriment of culturally-relevant curriculum, social emotional learning, and democratic practices. Moreover, testing seemed to only further entrench the institutional oppressions that emergent bilinguals, students of color, and students with disabilities had already been experiencing for decades. Testing outcomes became the bottom line indicators of students' capacities and value as human beings, obfuscating structural inequities. What I then saw was a regime of market-based reforms repackage and expand past injustice.

White and upper class ways of knowing and speaking circulate through curricular content, pedagogy, and writing practices in ways that often leave me feeling inadequate and unworthy of sharing educational spaces with those who display the "right" practices.

Recognizing these conditions I felt I needed to both teach and organize to alter society. Early in my teaching career I joined the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE), a group of current and former

public school educators whose mission is to struggle for justice both inside and outside the classroom. I could not be an educator without being an activist, and NYCoRE has been the space for creating a collective and critical voice in curriculum, policy, and governance in education and related areas.

In the borderlands of NYCoRE and teaching, I had continued to ask questions about educational and social inequality, and thus I entered the academy. Ultimately, I came to graduate school to sharpen my tools of analysis in order to map the operation of dominance within education and to participate in collective struggles to transform schools.

Trying to actualize my purposes has never been easy, and the first challenge was coming to grips with the ways higher education reproduces inequality. A recurring pattern across early childhood to higher education is the primacy of practices and values that are differentiated along race and class lines. White and upper class ways of knowing and speaking circulate through curricular content, pedagogy, and writing practices in ways that often leave me feeling inadequate and unworthy of sharing educational spaces with those who display the "right" practices.

Prior to coming to the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY-GC), I felt that doctoral studies reflected Western hierarchies of knowledge production and conceptions of academic writing as solitary acts. Seeking to be an educator-activist-scholar, I felt extremely vulnerable in this culture. I also realized that much of the research literature and conversations I had been exposed to were explicitly divorced from action. I thus sought to work with faculty in an institution where a different experience might be possible, though not guaranteed.

It is by no means perfect, but I found faculty and peers at CUNY-GC who represent an intellectual and political legacy that I hoped to inherit. Specifically, the late Jean Anyon and Michelle Fine's approaches have been models of "engaged scholarship" (Hale, 2008) where there is no binary between the scholarly and the political. Working with Jean she continually reminded us, her students, to develop our understandings of the political economy in relation to what was happening in our sites of educational research. She also pushed us to get out on the street, to help foster new and radical possibilities by participating in social movements (Anyon, 2005).

Michelle Fine's work with the Public Science Project also showed me that science for and by the people is possible and necessary to challenging inequality. For me, the work and lives of Jean and Michelle resonate with activist Ella Baker's call to lay down our buckets and begin to organize (Moses, 1989).

Working with engaged scholars, my scholar activist work turned toward understanding the current conditions

of education and education policy. Specifically I turned to thinking about neoliberalism. I understood that neoliberalism was a particular strain of capitalism that, while economic, is a set of cultural, ideological, and political processes and arrangements that are managing our world, our schools, and our lives (Lipman, 2006, 2011). I was moving my thinking toward what Dumas and Anyon (2006) described as “cultural political economy.” What was happening in education could not be solely explained by an economic analysis, but instead required a consideration of the relationship between economy, race, gender, disability, and sexuality. Doing cultural political economy is an intellectual, ontological, and political decision that has had positive and negative implications. This approach has spurred a renaissance in my work, pushing me to write, think, and speak back to educational injustice on multiple scales.

My dissertation, *Education in our Barrios*, is a digital and participatory research project where I work with two youth co-researchers in examining the impacts of contemporary education reform on a Latino core community (Morales, in press) in New York City. My dissertation has been a materialization of the engaged research I aspired to do.

At the same time, my position as an academic and a person “not-of-the-community” has meant that I am seen with some suspicion from the community. What I have found is that communities that are racially and economically marginalized have been poked, prodded, and exploited by universities to such a degree that they do not trust higher education. Centering my work on the notion that I must be accountable to the community requires humility and a willingness to build relationships. It also means keeping higher education institutions accountable to the communities in which they exist. Higher education cannot be allowed to remain an ivory tower that perpetuates the structural inequalities that it often professes to be trying to solve.

Higher education cannot be allowed to remain an ivory tower that perpetuates the structural inequalities that it often professes to be trying to solve.

Doing cultural political economy has also meant that I am explicitly deciding to be marginal within education studies because activist research is often not palatable for policy makers and mainstream researchers. I am trying to not compromise my work, but the flawed propping up of “science-based research” as the legitimate, objective,

facts forces me to think about how to make my work accessible, culturally relevant, and compelling to move researchers, policy makers, educators, and community advocates to act.

To this end, my dissertation project team and I have not only been interviewing various education community stakeholders, we have also begun to develop plans of action that focus on bringing varied stakeholders together, sharing, bilingually, our research findings, and providing opportunities for discussion. These are not grandiose plans, but they are rooted in engaging those most directly affected by structural oppression.

A divorce between research, education, and action is also what drew me to ReclaimAERA. In 2013, AERA decided to invite Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to speak at its annual conference as an “education researcher.” While AERA espoused a principle of “intellectual diversity,” I concluded that this invitation spoke to the primacy of market- and accountability-oriented approaches to education and research and the smothering of diverse views and dialogue within AERA. ReclaimAERA focused on organizing and mobilizing AERA members and non-members who were similarly dismayed by not only the presentation of Arne Duncan as a researcher, but also the broader privatization of education and teacher education.

It did cross my mind that participating in this group might affect my ability to access an academic position in the future. Would an academic institution find out that I was out there on a picket line and feel that I was not hireable? Would my ability to access certain funding sources be inhibited? How would this then impact the economic and emotional situations my family would be put in?

Still wrestling with these questions I ultimately opted to stick with the group. I stayed on despite trepidation because I felt that if we as academics and humans did not take this opportunity to resist, then the conditions that the schools I would send my son to, and the communities I would be engaging in research with, would be that much bleaker. I believe that scholarship and activism are inextricably linked. As educator-scholar-activists we cannot stand idly while the world around us is being destroyed.

Conclusion

Pushed to the margins, forced to take risks, situated in politically and emotionally vulnerable positions, rendered illegitimate by the structure, the challenges in pursuing scholar-activist work are real. Also real, however, are the new possibilities in uniting scholarship and activism. We answer with our lives. We hope that while our stories are not neat and simple, their complexities may inspire reflection and action. While our stories are very different,

what is evident is that instead of thinking about our work as somehow new and innovative, we both very much appreciate the paths laid out by our predecessors and teachers, like Maxine Greene and Jean Anyon. We believe that the struggle continues wherever we are, and that there is an interdependent relationship between scholarship and activism where the two constantly inform and inspire each other.

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