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Epilogue: The Power, Promise, and Necessity of Engaged Scholarship

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Why Engaged Scholarship?

In a widely circulated *New Yorker* magazine article on the subject of the dramatic decline in the number of university students gravitating toward some humanities fields, Nathan Heller (2023) notes that what students and critics of this large, vibrant, and diverse collection of academic fields seem to be demanding is a series of indicators reflecting greater social impact and relevance to the here and now. The rise of STEM fields and the focus on the precarity and marketability of university graduates has also done much to fuel this crisis (Ayers 2009). Regardless of what one might think of this trend and our critics, the increase in engaged scholarship is most certainly a long overdue and truly welcome response to these challenges.

My own experiences and journey with engaged scholarship includes working with a number of environmental justice, climate justice, human rights, animal liberation, anarchist, and abolitionist organizations and activists over more than three decades. Across those many years and interactions, I have found the work, our accomplishments, and the relationships we have built to be extremely fulfilling. As several contributors to this issue have rightly noted—supported by the writings of many other scholars as well—engaged scholarship frequently yields uniquely insightful and innovative research questions, creative and deeply informed analyses of social problems, and robust insights and conclusions that can re-shape our fields of study and our methodological traditions. Moreover, this kind of intellectual labor frequently results in sorely needed positive change within and across our communities. But it must be said that engaged scholarship also requires a lot more time and energy and tends to come with little institutional support, so it is a labor of love.

Those of us who are called to do this work understand that the stakes could not be higher. What is on the line here is the future and wellbeing of our varied academic fields and nothing short of the future of democracy and the health of our planet. My colleague Angana Chatterji once encouraged me to think of sustainable and equitable knowledge production as a key foundation for the development of sustainable and equitable communities. That is, we must insist on producing and sharing knowledge not for profit or personal gain, but for the purposes of supporting all denizens of society and the ecosystems upon which we depend. Achieving those goals requires relationship building and institutions that are committed to democracy and social and environmental justice. That commitment to democracy is also reflected in John Dewey's (2008) classic writings, as one contributor to this special issue noted. Most engaged scholars explicitly recognize that knowledge production is an inherently power-laden activity, so we understand our work in this vein to be directed, in equal parts, toward the goals of learning, critical thinking, equity, justice, ecological wellbeing, and democratic social change. These efforts could not be more important at this historic moment when anti-democratic and fascist political movements are on the rise around the world and where attacks on educational systems (via book bans, anti-Critical Race Theory legislation, reductions in public school funding, continued anti-teacher unionization practices, etc.) and policies that perpetrate climate, environmental, and social violence are ascendant as well.

Beyond Anthropocentrism, the Community Airbrush, and Simple Solutions

The writings of earlier and contemporary scholars grappling with these concerns have a tendency to frame the 'public' entirely in anthropocentric terms. But the 'public' that we often refer to in terms like *public intellectual* or *publicly engaged scholarship* has also expanded, as the need to recognize and include the full diversity of human and nonhuman communities has been increasingly acknowledged. Indigenous Studies and environmental humanities scholars have done us a great service by pointing out that there has never been such a thing as an exclusively human community; our communities have always necessarily been multispecies in membership because we are always enmeshed in interdependent and symbiotic relationships with more-than-human beings, including companion animals, livestock, insects, and a range of microorganisms within and outside of our bodies. That recognition demands that we rethink the nature of publics, society, and our politics so that our governance forms, structures, and aims might be transformed to account for this reality.

We must also be wary of falling into the trap of assuming that all goals, aims, and practices that occur within off-campus communities are marked and motivated by justice and equity. This is what I call the ‘community airbrush’ because like the photographic technology that presents a favorable—and inaccurate—visual representation of someone or something, scholars can implicitly communicate a view that community-based leaders’ motivations and actions are intrinsically noble and righteous. This practice is understandable, particularly given the concerns among scholars about the generations of academic injury and capitalist state extraction that have been impressed upon so many under-resourced communities. But critical transparency and accountability are goals that I have come to value in this work, while also acknowledging that there are many stories that are not mine to tell. Having worked with and for many community-based organizations for several decades, I can testify that there is no shortage of injustice, inequity, and harm occurring within those contexts and spaces, and activist-scholars need to be honest about that fact. These organizations are populated and led by human beings, which means they are just as flawed, imperfect, and occasionally petty, exploitative, and abusive as many of the rest of us (see Witt, this issue, 455; Joseph 2002). For example, I worked for an organization some years ago whose staff felt that the executive director was overbearing and wielded far too much power for an entity that prized itself on promoting equity and democratic change. In response, the staff and I began a unionization drive that was, unfortunately, ultimately crushed by the executive director who made it clear that the organization was to be run in a deeply hierarchical fashion regardless of the staff’s wishes. There is nothing unusual about that incident at all. In fact, union-busting is the norm among employers in this country and around much of the world. How and whether to write about and grapple with such realities is exceedingly difficult, but I would submit that we should consider finding ways to do so because to ignore these complex, messy truths may do a disservice to the people who are experiencing them and risks overlooking important dynamics that actually shape our scholarly conclusions. Relatedly, there are plenty of engaged scholars who are producing ideas that reflect the logic of dominance, racism, white supremacy, cis-heteropatriarchy, ableism, ecocide, and speciesism, so we must also be cautious about implicitly promoting the idea that engaged academic work is generally or inherently beneficial to society. Of course, that list of ‘isms’ has also been the norm among many scholars and disciplines.

In recent years there has been an exponential growth in the academy around the use of language around ‘problem solving’ and the search for ‘solutions’ to major social challenges. While this is often

part and parcel of the rise in engaged scholarship, I do have a couple of cautionary notes on this particular expression of what is otherwise a well-meaning trend. First, while I fully support problem solving and solutions-focused research as a laudable goal among scholars and our institutions, there is all too often a rush to promote superficial and problematic solutions to major social challenges. In other words, we frequently have not taken the time to fully understand a problem before trying to ‘solve’ it. Many scholars feel the pressure to act in the face of environmental crises, but acting without first developing a deep knowledge of the communities in which we work could be harmful. For example, in the environmental studies field, there is a significant embrace of climate policies focused on cap and trade, carbon sequestration, geoengineering, and various other techno-fixes and market-based approaches, all of which have been thoroughly condemned by leaders from Indigenous nations and communities of color who have witnessed how such initiatives (and their underlying logics) reinforce and exacerbate the climate crisis, racial capitalism, and settler colonialism (Whyte 2017). In the field of sociology (one of my home disciplines), for decades, a full throated support of reforming—but ultimately keeping intact—the criminal legal system has been the order of the day, while radical scholars and their community-based partners have long called for transformative change through commitments to decarceration, restorative justice, and prison abolition (Kaba 2021).

These tensions reflect not only differing views on the best way to advance ‘solutions’, but more importantly, they indicate significant disagreements about the nature of the problems we are seeking to address. Finally, while problem solving is a worthwhile goal, some of my colleagues have responded by suggesting that we need to invest energy into *creating* problems, particularly with respect to disrupting and challenging dominant institutions and power relations so as to facilitate greater pathways for equity, justice, democratization, and planetary wellbeing. The humanities, religious studies, interpretive social sciences, and various interdisciplines like Indigenous, Feminist, Ethnic, and Environmental studies are ideally suited to do this kind of work and have led the way.

Cautionary Notes and a Call to Embrace a Spectrum of Roles

All too often, the ‘engagement’ that scholars have with various communities consists of extractive, parasitic practices that involve gaining access, siphoning off information for research and publication purposes, and little to no follow through or accountability. This is an unfortunate state of affairs that many community-based activists have

decried and that has resulted in some communities refusing to work with scholars, protesting that they have been ‘studied to death’. A related challenge facing community-based organizations is that they are almost invariably under-resourced and therefore quite constrained in their capacity to devote limited staff time and energy to university-community collaborations. One of my favorite stories concerning this sensitive matter around engaged scholarship comes from some colleagues who wrote a chapter in a volume I co-edited:

...the first author once requested permission to study an EJM [environmental justice movement organization] whose members were deeply dissatisfied with their treatment by previous traditional researchers. She explained to the wary activists her plans for data collection and analysis and for publishing her results. They asked ‘What do we stand to gain from this study?’ Stumped, she finally replied, ‘Nothing at all.’ After 30 seconds of silence, a group leader successfully urged his counterparts to vote to allow the study because ‘at least she didn’t lie to us—she didn’t promise a goddamn thing!’ (Cable et al. 2005: 70)

A number of contributions to this special issue have highlighted the ongoing concerns arising from these tension and realities. As much as this is most certainly a serious matter, I appreciate the humorous tone of the story above, a reminder that we should be mindful of seeking moments of levity in the course of our often weighty work.

Climate justice scholar activist Corrie Grosse recently discussed her initial efforts at attempting to practice engaged scholarship and the challenges she encountered thinking through the process of doing scholarship with or on behalf of communities confronting fossil fuel extraction. Instead of following the typical engaged scholarly path, she decided that she could be more effective by being a scholar who is also engaged in supporting community-based struggles directly, who then returns to their desk and classroom and reflects on and shares those struggles (Grosse 2022). Similarly, Laura Pulido (2008: 356) writes that because many activist organizations seek out scholars with quantitative science skills—which she lacks—instead she decided to:

...consciously contribute in other ways. While some scholar activists prefer to function primarily as researchers, I tried to be a reliable supporter/member who could provide whatever assistance was needed. Sometimes this required setting up tables and making phone calls, while at others it meant utilizing my legitimacy as a university professor to provide testimony, for example, at public hearings. (Pulido 2008: 356)

My own engagement with various social change organizations reflects a hybrid of these two approaches: I am often just a warm body and social movement participant who also happens to be a scholar, while

at other times I adopt the role of a scholar who is co-producing knowledge and social change with community leaders.

The point is, while all of this is truly critical work, I refuse any sort of orthodoxy around what engaged scholarship looks like, and believe that we should make decisions about what works best based on context, candid internal reflections, and honest conversations with our community activist colleagues, partners, and friends.

Relationship building, Relational Organizing, and Community Building

Sorgen (p. 471, this issue) writes:

For engaged scholars, knowledge contextualized by community relationships is the means through which academic inquiry gains public traction. Hence, the movement from public-facing scholarship toward specific publics is a movement toward relation.

Gomez (p. 485, this issue) argues that engaged scholarship ‘is rooted in awareness of relationships, contributions to relationships, and, ultimately, is invested in strengthening relationships’. I fully concur. Other contributors to this issue (including Johnson) offered similar perspectives and share the lessons they have learned from this kind of commitment. Corrie Grosse’s (2022) study of climate justice activist networks in California and Idaho found that relational organizing (defined as building relationships to advance social change goals) was critical to advancing and sustaining this advocacy work. Sorgen and Grosse’s observations ring true for me, as I find that relational organizing and building personal relationships is a time consuming yet highly effective way to approach publicly engaged scholarship. The Central Coast Climate Justice Network is a coalition of California-based organizations and activists who came together with the explicit recognition that we will only succeed at addressing climate change when we center the voices and needs of racially marginalized, Indigenous, and working class communities who are on the frontlines of the climate struggle. Furthermore, that network also invests significant time and resources into building relationships across interpersonal, organizational, and demographic gulfs that have remained in place for far too long. I am proud to serve on the network’s executive committee and, as a core part of that work, I have spent innumerable hours in cafés, restaurants, cars, office spaces, homes, and on the phone building relationships with my fellow activists. While climate justice may appear to be our primary goal, community building is the ‘secret ingredient’ and the ‘glue’ that facilitates the process.

Activist and journalist Will Potter and I have both written about and worked with radical environmentalists and animal liberation activists, many of whom have been the subject of unrelenting state repression through the use of grand jury investigations, surveillance, incarceration, and being tagged with the label ‘eco-terrorist’ and ‘domestic terrorist’ (Pellow 2014; Potter 2011). I was personally involved in this work when one of my graduate student advisees was incarcerated for alleged animal liberation activities and the Federal Bureau of Investigation asked me to turn over the names and contact information of people whom I was interviewing for my research. I immediately joined my student’s support committee (he was freed after 5 months of imprisonment) and I publicly refused to cooperate with the FBI. I asked Potter what his thoughts were on how best to resist that kind of state repression and he stated:

You can take that one of two ways. You can look at it and be very overwhelmed and depressed and frustrated by it because it seems like this stuff just keeps going and going every generation. Or you can look at it and say, ‘Well, we’re smarter than them. Like, we can start piecing together how this is all working. We can build relationships with these amazing activists and learn from what they’ve done, and build stronger communities to resist it.’ So I think there’s a lot of fear, but there’s also a lot of positive work being done now as well that probably wouldn’t have been happening if it weren’t for all the bad things going on. (Author interview, April 2, 2009)

Engaged scholarship can be a powerful way to produce knowledge and build community, and these two goals work well when they are consciously paired together.

A Final Note on this Special Issue

The range of engaged practices that contributors to this exciting issue are involved with is truly extraordinary. This includes: writing for mainstream, non-academic audiences; developing university practices for evaluating and promoting faculty members in order to value community-based, publicly-engaged and public-facing labor (see Bucar, this issue); collaborating with Indigenous communities to protect and defend their sacred sites (see Johnson, this issue); and much more. There are so many outstanding and inspiring examples of engaged scholarship in this special issue that it will serve as an enduring source of skill sharing, support, and inspiration for those of us who might be hesitant or even resistant to exploring this approach to scholarship and social change.

Lloyd (p. 545, this issue) writes about ‘the puzzle in which the search for my own voice is entangled with the desire to amplify the voice of the Other without co-opting it’ and that is a key challenge in the development and evolution of publicly engaged scholarship. Witt (p. 448–49, this issue) notes that the emergence of the field of study sometimes known as religion and nature was borne out of a sense of crisis—the ecological crisis—and that this acknowledgement fueled a sense of purpose and a desire for greater engagement on the part of scholars. Picking up on these themes, Johnson (p. 518, this issue) humbly notes that religious studies scholars might take a moment to learn from academic fields like ethnic studies, Indigenous studies, and environmental studies because each of those areas of scholarship has long-standing traditions of public engagement and accountability. In fact, the birth of each of those fields was the result of struggle, made possible by battles waged on campuses around the U.S. where marginalized peoples and their ways of knowing were finally centered in significant ways by securing institutional support. That intellectual and political work has expanded and deepened educational, research, and social change opportunities within and well beyond the academy. As threats to our ecosystems, democracy, and marginalized human communities continue to present themselves, the need for engaged scholarship has never been greater.

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