

Afterword: Up Against the Institution

John Saltmarsh

Dear Departmental Personnel Review Committee Chair,

I appreciate your invitation to provide an external review of this book as you consider its scholarly merit and how to count it towards the promotion of the scholars who wrote it. I get asked to do many of these reviews, and, to be honest, it become tiring. You want to attract and retain the best, most innovative scholars, but then you devalue their work because it doesn't fit within an archaic institutional culture and suffocating, narrow institutional epistemology. You have a set of standards that you are applying in your assessment of the candidate, and rarely, if ever, do I get the sense that there is reflection upon the part of a committee like yours, or on the part of institutional leaders, as to whether the standards are the appropriate ones. Let me say that differently: whether there is reflection upon, and acknowledgement that the standards used are not objective, neutral, rigorous, or fair. They reinforce a certain politics, power, privilege, positionality, and structure of inequality related to the nexus of knowledge and power in the university. They privilege the epistemic orientation of some scholars and marginalize or discount that of others. As such, they do harm – psychological, emotional, career advancement, and economic harm. So when I attempt to explain, justify, and validate the scholarly merit of the work of activist scholars, I find that I am not only evaluating their scholarship, but trying to dismantle, disrupt, and reframe the cultures and structures of the academy so that it can better fulfill its mission and purpose of building a wider public culture of democracy through advancing diversity, inclusion, and equity.

While I do not want to, in any way, undermine the advancement and success of these scholars, I do want to use this opportunity not only comment on the rigor and impact of their scholarship, but to raise questions about the kinds of institutional environments that are needed to support this kind of scholarship and the scholars who produce it. For all the conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical contributions of this book, my concern is more with the way the institution supports, through a lens of epistemic equity, a wide range of scholarship and the scholars who produce it. So I will be asking some questions of you along the way.

Keeping in mind that this process may result in awarding lifetime employment at your institution, have you considered what you hope the scholars will do with their tenure and promotion once awarded? As scholars who have been marginalized and oppressed by your institution, what is your expectation of how they relate to it going forward? Do you want them to remain “an outsider within,” continuing to struggle against marginalization, or do you envision them as insiders in an institutional environment within which they can thrive? Do you expect that this award of recognition and security will lead to accommodation to the existing norms of the campus, or do you anticipate that these scholars will work to bring about changes in the institution that will contribute to dismantling the campus’s structures of inequality that create and reinforce, racial, gender, and economic injustices? You are making decisions here not only about the promotion of these scholars, but the future of your campus and a vision of higher education. Through your decision, you are signaling to future hires and current tenure track faculty what kinds of knowledge and scholarship are valued by your university. And you are signaling to these scholars who are being reviewed what you expect for them in their academic careers. You are sending messages about whether new scholars can expect, as these authors have written, “to aim higher than mere survival in the academy.” Without the space for wider range of

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epistemological frameworks, scholars like the authors of this book are not at home in their institutions. They are left with the decision to either leave the academy, to stay within it in a fugitive stance- in but not of the institution (existing in opposition while strategically re-directing its resources), or to stay and work to change it. What is it you are hoping for as your committee conducts this review?

This book is an exploration of a scholarly identity of being an “activist scholar.” I know, you cringe at the term “activist.” It sounds like there is a partisan political agenda at work, not the dispassionate, objective, positivist search for the truth and the facts that seems anything but “activist.” As activist scholars, they are challenging the assumptions, as Jennifer Simpson¹ has identified, that institutions are beneficent and that knowledge is disinterested. Instead, they are starting with the assumption that institutions are not just, institutional practices ensure high levels of social inequity, and that knowledge represent interests and is linked to historical, social, economic, and political context. With those assumptions, they raise questions about systemic injustice and explore possibilities for justice. In doing so they work to uncover truths and facts that are often overlooked, dismissed, or erased. It is activist in the sense of not avoiding the politics of knowledge, acknowledging that knowledge is essential for social action and social change. It is activist in that it is grounded in a politics of recognition of those who have been marginalized, silenced, and oppressed. Activist scholarship, as exemplified in the book, addresses questions of power, privilege, politics, positionality, identity, and implication, and assumes that

¹ Simpson, J. S. (2014). *Longing for justice: Higher education and democracy's agenda*. University of Toronto Press.

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- The public purposes of higher education are knowledge creation and dissemination, *and* the cultivation of democratic values, skills and habits - democratic practice
- The history of democracy reflects the workings of privilege and power in time and place, and has often led to injustice at the individual, institutional, and societal level. The aspirations of democracy dismantle these structures.
- All scholarship examines, or reifies by non-examination, the workings of power and privilege in knowledge creation and dissemination, and therefore has a political agenda.
- Thus, activist scholarly work critically examines historical, racial, economic, gender, and social contexts of knowledge production as part of every scholarly project.

What about theory and methods? Is this research and scholarship appropriately grounded in theory and approached through rigorous methods? As the authors describe in great depth and detail, activist scholarship originates in a rich and complex intersection of feminist, postmodern, postcolonial, and critical race theories and a wide range of disciplinary approaches and methodological practices. It is grounded in the understanding that knowledge is generated through direct engagement with social issues and with those affected by structures of inequality, with the aim of promoting justice and equity. The epistemic assumptions guiding this scholarship are that it is highly participatory, drawing on the knowledge, expertise, and cultural wealth of those who are closest to the issues being examined, and that how knowledge is produced and disseminated is collaboratively shaped by how it can best be used to effect social impact and change.

Even though the authors use the term “activist scholarship,” they also note that there is “a continuum of activist research projects,” well represented by the examples of their own research, and as such, that there is a wide array of terms used: action research, participatory action

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research, collaborative research, grounded theory, public intellectual work, engaged research, participatory research, politically engaged research, critically engaged activist research, publicly engaged research, community engaged research, community based research, and public scholarship. The common element, regardless of terminology, is research methods that are grounded in, as is explained in the volume edited by Charles Hale², “community production of knowledge to support community efforts in self representation and self-advocacy” (238) . It is research in which “people who are the subjects of research play a central role, not as ‘informants’ or ‘data sources,’ but as knowledgeable participants in the entire research process.” Thus, the scholar works “in dialogue, collaboration, and alliance with people who are struggling to better their lives” and the scholarship produced “embodies a responsibility for the results” as they affect those in the community who collaborate in the research in a way that they “can recognize as their own, value in their own terms, and use as they see fit” (4). Activist scholarship values relationships between those in the university and those outside the university that are grounded in the qualities of reciprocity, mutual respect, shared authority, and co-creation of goals and outcomes. Such relationships are by their very nature trans-disciplinary (knowledge transcending the disciplines and the college or university) and asset-based (where the strengths, skills, and knowledges of those in the community are validated and legitimized).

Let me pause. I am envisioning that by now you are saying to yourself that you have no idea how to make sense of this kind of scholarship. It has not been part of your academic socialization or your disciplinary training. It doesn’t fit the cultural norms of your department, college, or university. And because the policies guiding faculty reviews are artifacts of those

² Hale, C. R., ed. (2008). *Engaging contradictions: Theory, politics, and methods of activist scholarship*. Univ. of California Press.

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cultural norms, you are unsure of the criteria best used to fairly evaluate this kind of scholarship.

Fair enough. There are the criteria you are being asked to use to evaluate this scholarship, and there are the criteria you should use. Here is what I would suggest.

Activist scholarship should be evaluated in light of how it meets explicit cultural norms of:

- Participatory epistemology: the co-creation of knowledge that shifts the position of community groups from being subjects or spectators of the research process to collaborators in knowledge generation and problem solving, and shifts the position of students from knowledge consumers to knowledge producers (pedagogy and epistemology are intricately related).
- Collaborative research: recognizing an ecosystem of knowledge and acknowledging that the generation of new knowledge requires that academic knowledge be combined with community-based knowledge, eliminating a hierarchy of knowledge and a one-way flow of knowledge outward from the college or university.
- Scholarly artifacts as publications: The results of the scholarship are disseminated beyond disciplinary journals read only by specialized academics. For example, the products could include reports, exhibits, multimedia presentations, installations, clinical and other service procedures, programs and events, policy briefs, court briefings, legislation, or the many other products disseminated to public audiences.
- Nonacademic knowledge experts (peers): Along with a valuing of the knowledge and experience that both academics and non-academics bring to the processes of education and knowledge production comes the reframing of who is a peer in the peer review

process and the recognition that in certain circumstances the expert will be a non-credentialed, nonacademic collaborator.

- Trans-disciplinarily: recognizing that interdisciplinary inquiry remains bounded by academic disciplines and that trans-disciplinarily is fundamentally different in that it combines knowledge from multiple disciplines within university with knowledge that exists and is generated outside the university.
- Impact: academic impact is conceived as the advancement of knowledge that contribute to achievement of societally relevant outcomes and demonstrated by the way knowledge is transformed into public policy or social action and how scholars engage others to transform teaching, learning, and research into actionable and useful knowledge.

Let me pause again. And I am using this construct as Leigh Patel³ uses it, to pause in order to move beyond. What would it mean for your committee (department, college, and university) to move beyond trying to make sense of, and fully and fairly evaluate the merits of, activist scholarship per se? What would happen, instead, if you approached this review through a lens of equity, foregrounding how questions of epistemology are connected to the identity of the scholar. A lens of epistemic equity could shape efforts to resist systemic forms of oppression and cultivate more equitable faculty reward policy that addresses prejudicial exclusion of scholars from participation in the spread of knowledge through credibility discounting and epistemic marginalization. *Equity*, in this context, refers to efforts to resist systemic forms of oppression and cultivate a more equitable world—one that centers democracy as a primary core value and in which everyone has equal opportunity to thrive regardless of their backgrounds and situations.⁴

³ See Patel, L. (2015). *Decolonizing educational research: From ownership to answerability*. Routledge, p. 88.

⁴ This framing of equity draws on Museus, S. D., & LePeau, L. A., Navigating neoliberal organizational cultures: Implications for higher education leaders advancing social justice agendas. In A. Kezar and J. Posselt, Eds. (2019)

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Thriving is about access to opportunity, networks, resources, and supports—based on where we are and where we aspire to be - to reach one’s full potential.

Regarding scholarship (like activist scholarship), enacting *epistemic equity* would mean examining and responding to the impact higher education systems have on privileging whose knowledge is valued, what research is legitimized, and who gets to participate in the creation and spread of knowledge. It is

- Aimed at intentionally coupling diversity and inclusion commitments with organizational structures, policies, and practices.
- An asset-based approach that values the inclusion of voices that have historically been discounted, delegitimized, and marginalized through academic cultures and practices.
- Foregrounds identity and power in an analysis of ethics and justice countering systems’ default processes that silence and delegitimize certain knowers and ways of knowing, creating epistemic exclusion.
- Strategically shaping institutional cultures, structures, and practices to identify and address prejudicial exclusion of scholars from participation in the spread of knowledge through credibility discounting, and epistemic marginalization.⁵

Enacting epistemic justice would be consistent with the goal of activist scholars, to “promote justice within and beyond the academy.” The values of epistemic justice and activist scholarship

Administration for social justice and equity in higher education: Critical perspectives for leadership and decision making. New York: Routledge.

⁵ This framing of epistemic equity draws directly on the work of Miranda Fricker, Joan Aker, Victor Ray, and K. Wayne Yang. See Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press; Aker, J. (2006). Inequality regimes: Gender, class, and race in organizations. *Gender & society*, 20(4), 441-464; Ray, V. (2019). A theory of racialized organizations. *American Sociological Review*, 84(1), 26-53; and la paperson (K. Wayne Yang) (2017). *A third university is possible*. University of Minnesota Press.

align with one another. By enacting epistemic equity, your committee would be able to evaluate scholarship produced with an understanding that:

- Relationships between those in the university and those outside the university are grounded in the qualities of mutual respect, shared authority, and co-creation of goals and outcomes.
- Respect for the knowledge and experiences that everyone contributes creates solutions to social issues.
- Legitimate knowledge includes highly subjective, relational, contextual evidence such as stories and creative expression.
- There is a flow of knowledge, information and benefits in both directions between the University and community partners.
- Evolving perspectives on scholarship recognizes the role of academia is not static, and that methodologies, topics of interest, and boundaries between academic knowledge and community knowledge change over time.
- When undertaking research, there is shared authority at all stages of the research process from defining the research problem, choosing theoretical and methodological approaches, conducting the research, developing the final product(s), and participating in peer evaluation.
- Those who are closest to the lived experience of an issue or problem are the ones best able to address or solve it.

As I close this letter, I think of bell hooks and her observation in *Teaching to Transgress* that “we have to realize that if we are working on ourselves to become more fully engaged, there is only so much that we can do. Ultimately the institution will exhaust us simply because there is

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no sustained institutional support....” (160).⁶ The kind of institutional support needed goes well beyond the confines of your committee and its immediate task. Yet, you are either part of problem, or you are contributing to a solution. Over twenty years ago, Ernest Boyer observed that “the academy must become a more vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems” (15).⁷ How is this going to happen if not through activist scholarship? How will it happen if scholars who enact these partnerships are exhausted by their institutions?

Yours for the revolution,

John Saltmarsh

⁶ Hooks, B. (2014). *Teaching to transgress*. Routledge.

⁷ Boyer, E. L. (1996). The scholarship of engagement. *Journal of Public Service & Outreach*, 1(1), 11-20.