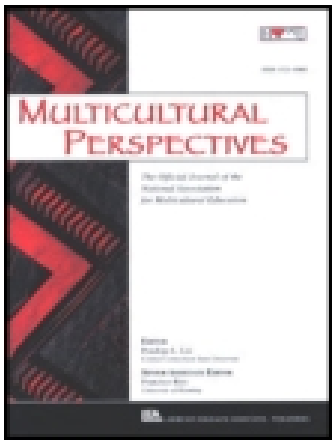

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The Movement We Make is the Community We Become: On Being an Activist in the Academy

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The Movement We Make is the Community We Become: On Being an Activist in the Academy

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As social justice educators we operate within an academy that often denies the necessity of activism in our work. In this article the author explores, through one person's story, how hierarchies of knowledge and status work within neoliberal paradigms to marginalize scholar–activists and embodied knowledge, and offers possible paths toward scholar-activism.

> "We were simply trying to change the way we went about our everyday lives so that our values and habits of being would reflect our commitment to freedom." hooks (1994, p. 26)

A friend and colleague asks if it is possible to be a scholar and activist. I both understand and do not understand his question. The further intellectual work is from the embodied experience of living, the more highly the academy values it. Activism acknowledges and grows from our embodied selves. To be an activist scholar is to risk losing one's value within the hierarchy of the academy, a value already fragile for Black and Brown scholars, women, and individuals from other marginalized groups. When my friend asked me this question I had been rejected by the academy because of my activism. I was not inclined to care what the academy thought about activism or scholarship. Still, he asked as we were gathering for a protest at the conference of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the largest educational research organization in the world. So the question had relevance, and, as it represented his struggle, demanded my attention and thoughtful reply.

I became an educator because I saw the classroom as a space to raise consciousness of diversity, fight for social justice, and grow the democratic project. I expected this would entail some struggle. The industrial models of education under which I was schooled were set for compliance and a subdued workforce. But, as well, much of my political education took place in the classroom. From debates on the U.S. war on Vietnam, to feminist consciousness raising, to uncovering the mask of my White privileges, classrooms have challenged me, ignited hope, and moved me toward action. I came to teaching as activism.

My first goal as a teacher is to grow a classroom community of trust, risk taking, a plurality of voices, and openness to uncertainty. As a high school English teacher, I had five "rules" for my classroom: listen, speak up, speak true to yourself, no one goes it alone, and imagine the life of others. We began each term reading poems that captured some of the reason these rules mattered and the struggle to attain them. We read, wrote, talked, acted, sang, sometimes danced, and watched movies, including our own, as we investigated how the socio-political world impacted how we knew ourselves and each other. In the early 2000s, as we faced a stolen election, violence in the Middle East, the events of September 11, 2001 and the virulent nationalism that followed, my students wondered with me, "Will things ever get better? How do we make change?" As the testing craze tightened under No Child Left Behind and I saw students—especially Black and Brown students and students with special needs, floundering in a system that marked them for failure before they entered my classroom—this question was harder to answer. The best I could tell them was that we lived in ember times: it was our job to blow air on the fire of meaningful hope so that it would not go out while we waited until there was enough wood to restore the flame.

When I became a teacher educator, I carried these practices with me. I told my students, who came eager to learn how to teach, to be given procedures and methods, that I wanted them to leave my classroom knowing less than when they came in. That is, asking better questions and entering the uncertainty of teaching with confidence and courage. Each fall I reread bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), to internalize her challenges and confirm my commitment to teaching as embodied work. I assigned the chapter on how theory develops from pain

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as the first reading in almost every course. My purpose: for students to value theory as something we develop as we live. hooks explores that space between those outside of the academy, who see theory as abstract, disembodied, and therefore worthless, and those inside the academy, who see theory as abstract, disembodied, and therefore valuable. She shows how, to the degree that we see theory as disembodied, we deny it as an enactment of White supremacy, sexism, and other oppressions. hooks taught me that my teaching is always *doing* something, either opening up spaces for radical imagination and new knowledge, or closing those spaces down. There is no neutral space.

But the myth of neutrality lingers in the academy. This is the neutrality of the White middle class, which dismisses lived experience and denies the ways oppressions are experienced and reproduced within the academy. As a White person, I have access to the promise of this neutrality: status and collegiality. As a woman, a contract faculty, and a teacher educator, my lived experience exposes how false this neutrality is. Each of these marked me as less than. Teacher education is one of the least valued disciplines within the academy, contract faculty struggle for the same recognition as their tenure line colleagues, and my scholarship consisted of teaching, building relationships with K–12 teachers and schools, rethinking programs and syllabi—not research and publication.

I knew myself as devalued within the system, but worked to prove myself to be just as good as my tenure line colleagues. Except that proving myself within the system was both a fool's game and a dangerous game. Fool's game because my rank was my identity no matter how hard I tried to move past it. Dangerous game because I silenced my soul in the reach to measure up. In particular, it silenced the activism so crucial to enacting social justice education.

My teaching was anything but neutral or disembodied; I reserved the knowledge of my embodied self for the classroom. It was too risky to expose myself to colleagues in the workplace, even though teaching for liberation extends beyond the classroom. I was insecure and fearful about losing employment. I wanted to do well. I did well. I did my job. But when the gulf between what I lived in my classroom and what I lived in the rest of my workspace became too great, I began to speak up and speak myself. I came to understand that my desire to be accepted by the academy was an empty effort, destined only to lead me away from what I most care about.

Being Answerable

As director of student teaching, I met with doctoral students who were supervising student teachers. We reviewed procedural issues, but reserved most of our time for exploring how we help students and each other to become teachers. After one heated conversation about standards, a doctoral student with whom I had been disagreeing—he said we could work within the standards, I said the standards changed us in profound ways and we lost too much working within them—approached me with a proposal. We would read the earliest work of the Russian philosopher Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (1993), as a way to examine our disagreement. And so we did, and so I came to be challenged, moved, and deeply influenced by Bakhtin's notion of answerability.

To be "answerable" is to be present to others with knowledge that we become with others. Our being with, carries an emotional–volitional tone which impacts our becoming and the knowledge we create. Like hooks, Bakhtin sees love as central to our becoming. I asked myself: Was I being answerable in how I entered my work each day? More and more, the answer was "no." The impersonal nature of the focus on data, standards, and rubrics distorted my ability to be present with students.

When a proposed national assessment for student teaching, the Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA), came to my institution, student teachers volunteered and were paid to participate in a pilot study. The three students in the pilot all came to the same conclusion: interesting instrument, do not use it to measure and grade student teaching. Becoming a teacher, they said, was too complex, messy, and human to be seen through a rubric. Their warnings went unheeded. Within months, I was told that I was to be "calibrated" in order to become a "scorer" of the TPA for a field test in the spring. The notion that human beings can be calibrated to evaluate complex human behavior reveals the dehumanization that is central to the accountability regime. Calibration is something we do to machines. Of my many objections to the TPA, central is that teacher educators' knowledge, experience, and understandings are being erased; our embodied selves have no value. When we deny our lived knowledge, we allow for the silent reproduction of inequities and injustice.

Longstanding hierarchies within the academy allowed the standards and accountability regimes to take hold. As a lecturer, I was deemed "calibratable." In our university only contract faculty were to be calibrated. Even in institutions where tenure line faculty were calibrated, this was possible because of the lowly position teacher education has within the academy. Our insecure status, as people who focus on teaching and who work with practitioners, and as a field in which there are many more women than men, position many of us to allow ourselves to submit to the dehumanization of our work, knowledge, and wisdom.

When I spoke out in department meetings against the TPA (since rebranded as the edTPA), I was not

only speaking out against the corporate takeover of public education and the neoliberal ideology that reduces us to either commodities or consumers. I was also challenging the norms of the academy, norms which separate knowledge from experience, which devalue certain people and kinds of knowledge. The traditional structures of the academy make for fertile ground in which to grow the neoliberal project. To the degree that the academy pretends at disembodied knowledge, adheres to hierarchies of power and epistemology, and denies the space for our embodied selves, it allows the discourses of data, accountability, resource generation, and calibration to infect our intellectual work, our scholarship.

This entryway for neoliberalism is not only paved by academic tradition. As I spoke out and faced material consequences for doing so, my most difficult interactions came with those colleagues who used post-modern theories of power and language to dismiss the ramifications of taking a stand. One time, a full professor colleague, as protected as a person can be, and silent in the face of the increasing accountability and surveillance, said to me "You have a voice, Barbara," with no recognition that, as a contract faculty, using my voice meant I could lose my job or that her status kept her from having to negotiate the implication of the accountability system. Another time a colleague, in conversation about the TPA, kept saying that I had no more right to my opinion than anyone else to theirs. The conclusion being, since we all speak from various positions, we cannot ever take a stand for something we believe in. These denials of power structures and their material consequences, coupled with a weak relativistic version of post-structural thinking, allow some in the academy to refuse their answerability, to stay safe in a system that is undoing our lives and communities at each turn.

Being Human as Resistance

Ember times extended beyond the Bush administration and into Obama's presidency with drone murders, the surveillance state, and Race to the Top. Student teachers, practicing in schools where canned curriculum, high stakes testing, and fear were their daily experiences, challenged me: "How do we make change, Barbara?" "When will this end?" At the same time, I sat in meetings where plans were made for outcome measures, data reports, and various alignments of standards, assessments, and performance measures.

In my courses I was finding my way to more confident uncertainty, deeper attention to the human elements of teaching, learning, and learning to teach, and making more direct connections to teaching as political work. Meanwhile, the university administration imposed mandates that denied the essence of my practice. The chasm of difference became unbearable. I could no longer accept my complicity in undoing the relationships and social justice focus that were the heart of my work. But how to say this in an academy that denies the centrality of our embodied answerabilty? Through embodied action.

In the spring of 2012, students in the secondary teacher education program where I was the coordinator refused to participate in a Pearson-Stanford field test of the TPA. I supported them, going up against an administration that used all manner of obfuscation to pressure the students into participation. When students won the right to choose to opt in or out and an article about their victory appeared in *The New York Times* (Winerip, 2012), I received a letter on non-renewal. The department chair, in a meeting with me and the Dean for Academic Affairs, accused me of having undue power over the students. The irony was deep. Here were students speaking out for their choice to name what it meant to become a teacher, to refuse to participate in the corporatization of education, and the administration positioned them as helpless victims of my power. This accusation is made possible in a system that both pretends that relationships are not central to teaching, and denies that the university's insistence on student participation in a field test is an abuse of power. When we deny embodied knowledge and relationships, it is in the service of unnamed power. It is in our bodies and our communities that we know and name the ways we are silenced, the loss of our souls, the range of oppressions.

In the spring of 2013, I joined colleagues protesting a speech by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan at the annual conference of the AERA. As we met in Union Square Park in San Francisco, the mood was mixed. On the one hand, incredible excitement and enthusiasm to know ourselves giving voice to what we believed. On the other hand, anxiety and caution as we considered actions that risked our being ostracized from the very institution that we had spent our lives trying to win favor with. Thus, the question of being a scholar or an activist emerges: Can we be both?

The day the students signed their names to opt out of participation in the Pearson-Stanford field test, we sat silent—in awe of each other and ourselves. We came to this moment through difficult questions and conversations, naming the world, and allowing ourselves to imagine being teachers and students of teaching unlike the roles we were given. Our knowledge—scholarship—grew in community and led to action. When my colleagues and I planned a protest of the speech by Secretary Duncan, we were less sure of each other and ourselves, less sure of where our commitments lay: to each other or to AERA? To a community of mutual, complicated relationship and love, or to the status and access of a professional organization?

The AERA protest was more complicated and less powerful than I had hoped. Still, the act itself mattered. In

conversations afterward, we shared our struggles and our disappointments in ourselves and one other. One month later, some of us led a day-long conference of teachers, faculty, parents, students, and community members naming the assault on public education and planning actions to reclaim education for the common good. From these meetings, actions, and conversations a community is growing in which we challenge each other about areas of difference, push each other about our choices, buoy each other under the ache and loneliness of the assault on education, and grow toward a community of action.

Each time we reach across the false boundaries of status and hierarchy in the academy, open ourselves to the diversity of lived experience, to vulnerability, confusion, mixed desires, and fear, we grow a revolution both within the academy and against corporatization. The academy's denial of the call to be "answerable" teaches me how potent human connection is. The dehumanizing forces of accountability regimes exist because our "being alive with others" is the place we light the fire of possibility. In these spaces, we make meaning—we are scholars. In these spaces we organize for change—we are activists. The question, can we be scholar activists, is a question institutions pull from us: Can I be in this institution and live in this way? But maybe we need instead to ask: What kinds of communities can we create and be a part of that make a space for the full range of how we know, learn, create, love, and struggle together?

To answer this question, we need to challenge entrenched institutional norms in the academy, including norms of politeness, decorum, and ostensible neutrality. We need to be prepared to be ostracized and excluded. Moreover, we need to give up our desire for approval from a system that measures worth through the lens of elitism and instead enter solidarity with people outside of the academy. As activists, we must remember that the movement we make is the community we become. From classrooms, to meetings, to coffee shops and union halls, we enter this work as answerable and embodied, aware that it is in acts of vulnerability, human love, and conflict that we knit liberation.

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