

Introducing Scholactivism

Reflections on Transforming Praxis in and beyond the Classroom

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Let the world change you, and you can change the world.

—Ernesto “Che” Guevara

When I was a boy I always assumed that I would grow up to be both a scientist and a Red. Rather than face a problem of combining activism and scholarship, I would have had a very difficult time trying to separate them.

—Richard Levins

Merging scholarship and activism, *Scholactivism* evokes a conceptual shadow: *scholasticism*, a term with its origins in the first medieval universities, now come to signify a “narrow-minded insistence on traditional doctrine.”¹ Changing two letters in this old-fashioned word, our emphasis shifts from the dogmatic, tradition-bound tasks of academic adjudication, to a project more in line with Karl Marx’s famous Eleventh Thesis on Ludwig Feurbach, theses aimed at the scholasticism of his own day: “Philosophers have sought to understand the world. The point is to change it.” We move from the frame of resolving contradictions through cloistered academic disputation, to that of exposing and sharpening contradictions, so they can be resolved through extra-curricular, world-transforming *practice*.

Change the world through praxis, yes! But how? By what means, from what vantage point, upon what terrain, using which tools, towards what end? Certainly the will to change the world does not mean the abandonment of one’s current position within that world. Nor can one change the world in an emancipatory way without deeply understanding it. So then, our Call for Papers asked: How can scholarly work—the work of knowing and learning, from teaching to research, writing and publishing—be done *differently* in light of an activist horizon aiming at fundamental social change? Furthermore, we asked, how has the university terrain itself been transformed by social, economic, and political forces in the current period, and how have these changes closed down or opened up problems and possibilities for scholactivism? The present issue sets out from the assumption that if the synthesis of knowledge and action— theory and practice— that Marx’s theses on Feurbach pointed towards is to be realized,² we must grasp both the shifting terrain of our immediate situation, as well as the more general tendencies affecting the world-system, so we can radically relate actions in the former realm to the horizon of the latter.

As Gary Zabel points out in his essential contribution to this volume, human *praxis* by definition aims at transformation of the social world. Praxis is thought-inspired action—based

upon action-informed thought—which leaves both the world and the agent working upon it different than they were before. In emphasizing not just *praxis* but *reflections on transforming praxis* our issue insists on the need to deliberately and collectively take measure of current modes of scholarly and activist praxis alike, in light of changing conditions and new urgencies. There is of course no shortage of well-intended practice in the world today, but too often the lessons drawn from such practice remain localized or are lost when a particular upsurge subsides. Such is the state of a left without solid centralizing networks, without geographic or temporal continuities in leadership or organization, a left that, we might say, has not yet learned how to *party*.³ By bringing together in this volume the reflections of dozens of colleagues and comrades, we hope to help scholar-activists from around the world learn from one another, and in this way to make a humble contribution to transcending the fragmentation and isolation that remains a barrier to materializing Marx’s Eleventh Thesis.

The focus here is on praxis “in and beyond the classroom,” but our “beyond” is not a simple “outside.” Certainly, many of the reflections gathered foreground extra-curricular modes of engagement: faculty union organizing, off-campus anti-austerity mobilization, ecological and anti-racist community organizing. Others reflect upon collective struggles taking place in non-classroom spaces still linked with the university—from digital university practices, to the physical and financial architecture of the neoliberal campus. At the same time, other contributors draw out the need to re-conceive classroom praxis itself. The “beyond” here thus also signals the way that struggles ‘elsewhere’ reverberate back into the classroom, creating opportunities for new and engaged forms of “traditional” teaching and research.

In this *Scholactivist* spirit, each of the 26 pieces (43 contributors) in this 500 page volume recounts and reflects upon not only a current situation facing our profession, our people, and/or our planet, but a deliberate attempt to change that situation. These are not simply “applications” of preexisting theoretical knowledge, but narratives and theorizations of practical engagement. As Adolph Reed put it in a forceful polemic with the late great Ellen Meiksins Wood, “Capitalism’s limits and requirements can be known only by testing them practically.” As Mao put it: To know the pear, you must bite the pear.

By and large our contributors are united in grasping the “pear” as the neoliberal university, understood as both a site and a symptom of broader capitalist crises.⁴ Still, as **Edward Carvalho’s** striking cover art dramatizes, *Scholactivism* expresses not a sense of settled conclusions, but of rupture. *The apple*—the traditional desktop gift of student to teacher, not to mention a symbol of tabooed knowledge— *has exploded*. A pen torpedoes across the page. (Whether it be the implement of austerity administrators or of determined scholactivists themselves is not entirely clear.) The specter of a fist rises in the background, as the blasted bits of apple scatter. How much of the fruit can be or should be salvaged? What remains edible and what is best left to rot? Is the apple to be replaced altogether by the fist? Or can the raised hand save the apple from the falling academic pillar? The split page rendering of “*Schol-Activism*” further signals a ripping, a tearing in the academic fabric: *scholars compelled to become... something else*. But what?

Conversations with Activist Scholars

Carvalho follows up his explosive cover image with our opening text, an interview with **Ward Churchill**, “**The Activist Scholar: A Responsibility ‘to confront and dismantle.’**” This provocative and informative exchange, we should note, is a follow-up to an essay Churchill contributed to the 2008-9 issue of *Works and Days*, after being terminated from his post at University of Colorado-Boulder.⁵ This time around, Ward Churchill offers his own straightforward definition of scholactivists: they are the ones who don’t “just talk the talk, but walk the walk.” Churchill offers a challenge, “There’s a responsibility to engage in concrete actions right along with the nonscholars whose liberation struggles we purportedly embrace, outside the comfort zone of the academy.” “Absent such entanglement,” Churchill states, “scholactivism is merely a sham.”

As Churchill’s case makes painfully clear, such entanglement comes with risks, even for the tenured professor and internationally renowned scholar. Beyond this provocation, Churchill offers an inspiring discussion of fellow scholactivists who have for decades “walked the walk,” but also some critical reflections on problematic trends that have tended to hamper scholar-activism in the current period: from “the left’s so-called turn to theory,” to trends in online academic publishing that tend to scatter rather than gather radical thought, to a growing emphasis on localism in post-60s activism (and activist-aligned scholarship). Often lacking the global vision of emancipation as well as the broad social movement networks of their Sixties forebears, such locally rooted activism, for Churchill, is “both good and bad, but makes it a lot harder to keep track of who’s doing what.” With our opening section of interviews and roundtables *Scholactivism* strives to assist with this mapping problem.

The remarkable international roundtable of socialist scholar activists facilitated by **Babak Amini** gives us a comradely conversation that crosses four continents. “**Scholactivism: A Roundtable Interview**” features world-renowned Marxist intellectuals with actually existing ties to working class organizations, social movements, and leftist political parties ranging from Brazil, to Canada, South Africa, France, and Italy. While attending to geo-national differences, Amini’s contributors trace worldwide historical trends and their implications for Marxist scholarship. Among them: shifts in the state of the workers movement, changes in dominant ideology, and the permeation of global capitalism into academic realms via the increasingly corporate university.

Amini’s introduction to this hefty exchange usefully historicizes the concept of “the intellectual” in relationship to politics and society as it has come down to us through the ages, drawing a focus especially to Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci’s interventions in this tradition. He traces a genealogy from the idea of the elite-bound “philosopher king” to the “neutral” intellectual seen as on the side of progress “in general,” to the notion of intellectual production as necessarily “taking sides” in the social struggle that is fundamental to capitalist society as such.

Uniting with this overall commitment to proletarian partisanship, several in this roundtable nonetheless share concerns about the limited space available for genuine scholar-activist engagement in the current moment. This includes a concern about the resistance to serious (self)critique found among many activist, worker, and left-identified groups. The

roundtable thus raises a crucial question: *How can scholactivists work to create more fertile ground for mutually transformative theoretical-practical exchange? What are the actually existing prospects for putting critical theory into dialogue with organized working people in such a way as it can—again—become a material force in history?*

Though the exemplary rigor of all the responses (including also **Ricardo Antunes**, **Pietro Basso**, **Michael Löwy**, and **José Paulo Netto**) demand attention, I will highlight **Patrick Bond's** and **Leo Panitch's** contributions if only to emphasize their useful methodological proposals. Bond proposes that scholars reverse their tendency to see themselves as the “teachers” and instead seek out lessons from activists themselves, drawing upon their practical experiences challenging established systems of oppression and exploitation as a way of deepening and concretizing scholarly understandings of such theoretical issues as the relationship between ‘Structure and Agency.’ Attending closely to the experiences of activist attempts (both positive and negative) may yield valuable knowledge about unanticipated possibilities for transformation, as well as the range of state responses to such resistance. Bond frames for us a basic method: “activist production of knowledge through conflict, fed back into rigorous intellectual exercise...so as to codify this knowledge” and render it capable of being effectively deployed as a tool in broader intellectual debates and struggles. This call to put academics to work in the service of actually existing resistance movements seems to me a valuable one. The focus on resistance as a primary site of knowledge-production and a practical anchor for theoretical reflection is especially welcome. Correct ideas about the nature of actually existing capitalism and the possibilities for radically transforming it cannot be derived from explication of the Marxist classics alone.

Bond exemplifies the self-critical spirit for which he argues. He discusses his own past errors, such as in the early 2000s when he publicly predicted the impossibility of the movement for cheap AIDS drugs in South Africa, only to be proven wrong by a social movement. Bond admits that he overstated the fixed dominance of power structures opposing the emergent movement of the HIV-positive and their allies; within a few short years of intense struggle, activist efforts taught Bond the limits of his own sophisticated Marxist theoretical orientation. Activists taught him the surprising power of people in motion...and the danger of academic pretense. Here in the US, in the wake of a Bernie Sanders campaign whose unprecedented electoral success and ideological breakthroughs similarly shook the pompous predictions of hard-core Marxist determinists, Bond's advice seems particularly prescient. Even the rigorous and well-intended critic can fall into serious error, Bond points out, especially when they are distanced from the thick of the struggle. Bars look all the more solid when you're not close enough to see how many people are shaking them. Drawing from such self-critical reflections, Bond valuably codifies what he calls the “ten deadly sins” of left intellectuals with respect to people's movements, pitfalls that radicals based in academia need to struggle consciously to avoid. We should post them on our office walls.

Leo Panitch's comments also deserve some singling out. He favors identifying openly as a *socialist* in his intellectual work—emphasizing the serious responsibility that being a socialist scholar entails. After all, for those who really are committed to contributing to the project of understanding the world in order to change it, it matters more to *get things right*...not just to get them published. In a similar spirit, Panitch emphasizes the need for critical inquiry *within* the socialist and working class movement, insisting on the need to resist calls to suppress criticism

in order to “sound optimistic” or paint a feel-good face on an often ugly picture. He argues for subjecting social movements and working class organizations to comradely critique—not in opportunistic “take downs” in the pages of the *New York Times*, he writes, but in the pages of magazines like the *Socialist Register*—so we can really learn the lessons of what is working and what is not and why. In a similar vein, Panitch draws a distinction between *advocate* intellectuals who ally with existing calls to expand rights to “victims” within the coordinates of the existing system, and *critical* intellectuals who go to the root of things and draw out not just the “victimhood” but the actual and potential *power* of working class people within the system.

Panitch emphasizes the importance of socialist researchers doing what they can to put to rest flawed but influential concepts in the Marxist tradition that too-often have functioned to comfort, blind, or mislead the movement. He identifies at least two examples. First, the notion that capitalism or the Empire is on its last legs, and thus that revolutionary opportunity is right around the corner—a view often buffeted by reference to the “falling rate of profit” in Marx’s second and third volumes of *Das Kapital* (volumes which, as Panitch points out, Marx did *not* himself ever publish...perhaps for good reason). Second is the notion that the state under socialism/communism is to be “smashed” or to “wither away”—rather than, say, to be restructured and run in a radically different manner. Both correctives—one “pre-revolutionary” and the other “post-revolutionary”—link up with Panitch’s broader argument for a socialist praxis that takes what he calls a “fifty year view.” We need more than calls for overthrowing the existing order, he insists; we need to patiently build the kind of institutions and movements that can actually challenge, overthrow, and transform a capitalist imperialist system that is in fact incredibly strong—financial and ecological crises notwithstanding. While this is not the place for a full response to these provocations, Panitch’s willingness to challenge the ruling common sense of not only neoliberalism but marxism is commendable.

Rounding out our “Conversations” section, **Carl Grey Martin** facilitates a remarkable discussion with well-known radical historian **Marcus Rediker** (co-author with Peter Linebaugh of *The ManyHeaded Hydra*) and scholar-activist **Modhumita Roy**, presenting a lively exchange that bridges from the classroom to the slave ship, from the archive to the film screen, from ethics to epistemology, from the “medieval period” to today. Aptly titled “**Narrative Resistance,**” their discussion attends in various ways to both framing terms, exploring the theory and practice of writing and teaching “history from below.” Exemplified by Rediker’s many books on sailor and slave resistance upon the high seas, this approach seeks out the “lost voices of the past,” aiming to recapture not only the individual experience, but also the collective agency of workers and oppressed peoples entangled in the exploitative structures of capitalism and empire. Emphasized throughout is the value—and the challenge— of writing *narrative*, of crafting stories that are accessible to the broadest possible audience.

The argument for a narrative restoration of lost voices (including propertyless voices from outside trade unions, political parties, or even the wage-relation itself) leads this roundtable to challenge postmodern and post-structural paradigms, which, in the guise of resisting “grand narratives” of history, often make a fetish of difficulty, particularity, and indeterminacy, smuggling in individualist and identity politics in the name of resisting the notion of thinking capitalism as a totality. Our discussants challenge such anti-totally totalizing, both on an epistemological plane and an ethical one. Rediker provocatively calls out postmodern doubt-

mongers for “the sheer laziness” of ignoring other—tough to find, but nonetheless available—forms of historical evidence, prematurely leaping from aporias in the easily accessed documents of the ruling class to transcendental questions such as Gayatri Spivak’s infamous “Can the Subaltern Speak?” “Can the subaltern *speak*?” Rediker quips, referring to his own archival investigations: “I can’t get the subaltern *to shut up!*” Squarely facing the crisis of contemporary capitalism, the authors emphasize the need to “ransack” the past for stories that can help to stir resistance, spread insurgent seeds, and create space for revolutionary thinking in the present. The point is not just to pursue knowledge of the past as a scholarly end-in-itself, but to construct graspable truths which, however partial, may be of use—in the form of lessons as well as inspirations—to people who are still struggling, materially and morally, against in the capitalist-imperialist system today.

This sense of historical and human responsibility spills into a valuable discussion of classroom teaching, and into reflections on the relationship between activism and scholarship. Urgently pressing home the need to do more than model radical ideas and critical methods, especially in a historical moment where many university students lack a mass political catalyst akin to the Vietnam War, Modhumita Roy argues for incorporating activist assignments into our syllabi, to familiarize students with modes of social engagement that transcend the academic. Responding to this, Marcus Rediker outlines two of his own crucial pedagogical objectives. These remain within and yet also in a way transcend the classroom: first, to bring students to recognize and reflect upon the fact that their own (selective) historical ignorance has a (class) structure; and second, to situate students imaginatively in dramatic moments in history when actual people had to make actual decisions in the face of actual situations involving oppressive institutions. While Rediker may not formally assign activist projects in his classes, then, he nonetheless compels students to dwell in the existential time-space of activism, where they must confront the question of *what is to be done* in the face of social injustice, past or present. To this Carl Grey Martin adds the useful point that, by confronting students with the very fact of resistance, such a “history from below” upends dominant notions of History, which even to this day, naturalize oppression and injustice, indoctrinating students with the idea that “back then” “everyone accepted” injustices such as slavery—slave-holders and slaves alike being mere *products* of their time. To foreground resistance, then, is not just to recover lost voices, but to make palpable for students the material fact that history—both as event and as representation—is *produced by actual people*, in actual circumstances. In this sense, even the recovery of an “isolated act” of “individual” resistance passes the torch of possibility. A single spark of hope from the past may start a prairie fire.

Adding one more dialectical twist, Rediker recounts how important it has been for him throughout his career, even as he stands in academia, to keep one foot “planted on the pavement,” as a way of keeping in touch with the “sources of rage” in society. Drawing from his long-standing prison activism and in particular his conversations with revolutionary political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal, Rediker emphasizes how “activism taught me what to look for” in his historical work. Modeling an exemplary mix of accessibility, radicalism, and humility, he offers some down-to-earth scholactivist advice: “If you go and talk to people, you can learn a lot.”

Defining and Contesting the Terms and Terrain of “Schol-Activism”

The meta-discussion of how we ought to conceive (or not conceive) the relationship between scholarship and activism is developed further in our second section of essays. **Toby Miller’s “We are All Activists Now”** queries the term “activism” as it is often heard these days, taking aim at a number of problematic assumptions and tendencies. He alerts us to the danger of grasping “activist” as a personal attribute that has more to do with self-conscious leftist posturing than with the actual content of work being done. Miller laments and cautions against the kind of “activist” stance that exudes skepticism towards all authority and towards established institutions and science as such, pointing out how postmodern and post-structuralist traffic in doubt and uncertainty has an uncanny resemblance to the anti-scientific skepticism of climate denialists. Which is to say, antiauthoritarian or anti-institutional “activism” is not inherently progressive.

Nor is academic activism the exclusive property of the political left. As Miller points out, on our very campuses—both within and outside of humanities departments—an activist right remains quite strong; indeed, the invisibility of such activism is often a sign of its institutional strength. This then brings Miller to another crucial reminder, namely that the university itself remains a crucial site of political struggle, not some site removed from ‘real politics.’ Would be scholar-activists best learn the particular terrain of the political struggles that are going on right on their campus, and within their particular academic discourses. Miller’s essay thus usefully cautions us against a one-sided notion of activist practice that suggests “real politics” is always elsewhere than the academy, as if the best thing that a scholactivist could do with their institutional position is to resign it and “take to the streets.”

For that matter: where *are* “the streets” today? **Patrick Colm Hogan’s** ambitious **“Politically Engaged Scholars: An Analytic of Positions and Norms”** constructs an expansive logical “grid” for mapping and evaluating various modes of scholar/activist activity. Hogan’s map complicates the idea that there is or should be a single model or single privileged site for our schol-activism, effectively arguing for a kind of “diversity of tactics” among politically engaged scholars. Hogan goes beyond describing the existing multiplicity, thoughtfully tracing the strengths and weaknesses, benefits and dangers, of the various positions and approaches he considers. Thus while he argues against enforcing any narrow norm of schol-activism, he does not simply affirm spontaneous pluralism, but rather aims to foster what he calls “an effective distribution of activities in practice.” Hogan makes clear that there are many valid ways to bring together scholarly expertise and political engagement—perhaps then the next challenge is how to bring these various modes *themselves* together in a more strategic manner?

I won’t recount here the full schema of Hogan’s impressive grid, but a few features of his approach deserve to be highlighted. One admirable aspect of his map is that it offers us a means for respecting different approaches as complementary rather than as competing. His essay pushes back against the tendency to mis-recognize a difference in the *mode* of engagement—or in institutional *position*—as expressive of an underlying political *antagonism*. In a related vein, Hogan is particularly insightful in his treatment of the practical and theoretical implications of scholar-activist modes that take their distance from existing institutions vs. those that engage directly or even join them. Here the tendencies he maps are seemingly contradictory, but perhaps dialectically so. For instance, as Hogan argues, scholactivist involvement with the

nitty gritty of existing organizations and institutions tends to both productively complicate *and* problematically oversimplify engaged theory and practice. Such a mode usefully concretizes by giving scholars a sense of the structure, texture, and contingent lived detail of problems that they previously understood from afar. Yet it also can lead to simplification, due to several factors: the “anchor effect” of dominant positions within a particular organization, the constraints of activist time-tables, the need to communicate to non-specialists about complex issues, as well as the tendency for such scholar-activists to be drawn out of the zones of their formal training. Are these opposed tendencies—towards concretization on the one hand, towards over-simplification on the other—inherent to this mode of scholactivism, or might it be possible to develop a synthesis whereby the close concretization of practical experience is not undercut by the dumbing down of rushed or superficial application? By noting the dangers—and the virtues—of such immediate practical involvement, Hogan makes a genuine contribution to thinking through the very contradiction that he maps; neither the “pragmatists” nor the “purists” have all the answers here. In light of this dialectical reading of the opposition Hogan maps—that is, the contradictory fact that changing one’s structural relationship to an issue can have major bearing (both positive and negative) on one’s ability to grasp the reality of that issue—it’s tempting to put a bit of pressure on a few of his more normative judgments. Hogan’s affirmation of the ethical virtues of *universality* and individual *autonomy* leads him to make two criticisms that I feel compelled to question. The first is his criticism of Stephen Salaita (and those who have championed his cause) for a failure of *universalism*. Here, to be clear, Hogan, like Salaita, condemns the murderous assault of the state of Israel on the people of Gaza, and unites with the outrage over Salaita’s unjust firing for voicing outspoken criticisms. Where Hogan differs concerns the particular form of Salaita’s tweet-critiques, and the general reluctance of the left to take issue with Salaita’s use of language that, Hogan argues, implied an endorsement of mass violence against a civilian population, albeit an illegal, settler one. While I appreciate Hogan’s willingness to push back against the prevailing left-wing view of a hot topic—and I agree with him that we ought to struggle to keep open space for dissident views—it does seem that his reading of Salaita’s tweets may slight the context in which those comments were made, a context in which Salaita’s use of provocative language went beyond the realm of academic civility. Twitter after all is a medium characterized by sarcasm, irony, personal emotions, and provocative over-statement—a place where often the loudest or shocking voices are the ones that get heard. This context in mind, is it not possible that the provocative nature of Salaita’s comments—comments which he was of course in no position to implement—by virtue of their directness and visceral rage, actually *helped* to draw more people into paying attention to, and to opposing, the *actual* mass murder being committed in Gaza by the US-backed Israeli state?

My second concern involves Hogan’s treatment of the ethical virtue of *autonomy*, as it relates to the question of “politics in the classroom” and teachers who “fire up” their students. On the one hand, Hogan incisively critiques Stanley Fish, arguing that, insofar as politics are organically related to a scholarly field, it is wrong to expect teachers to abstain from discussing them; such a “non-politics” is of course itself a disguised politics, what Hogan calls a “pseudo-non-politics.” Yet, on the other hand, when it comes to teachers “firing up” their students, or introducing “external” politics into a course, Hogan takes a negative view, arguing that such an approach threatens to impinge upon the autonomy of the students (and of the academic course material). But, again, in light of Hogan’s own treatment of the dialectical relationship between (always imperfect) practical engagement and theoretical insight, might it be possible that by “firing up” students a teacher prompts them towards a more intensive

engagement with a topic, making possible a deeper grasp of course-related content than would otherwise occur?

The MLA Subconference Collective (**Bennet Carpenter, Laura Goldblatt, Lenora Hansen, Karim Wissa, and Andrew Yale**) challenges the notion of the autonomous academic classroom with their co-authored article “**Schol...Exodus: Learning Within/Against/Beyond the Institution.**” Offering an ambitious rethinking of the terrain of the contemporary university, this essay deploys class-composition theory to trace the contradictory and conflictual production of both worker and student subjectivities on campus, with the aim of locating crisis points that may indicate the sites of future struggles. Central to this collective contribution is the notion that these student and worker subjectivities are more and more being produced through the pedagogy of the built environment of the university itself, and the practices these environments inscribe. Universities are teaching more than course contents; they are teaching unconscious “civics lessons” about who belongs where, through the arrangement of dining halls as much as course syllabi.

In light of the centrality of “material-spatial practices” to subject formation in the contemporary university, these authors express skepticism towards the idea that the classroom itself can function as a transformative space; they argue for *exiting* the classroom rather than for “flipping” it. To be sure, their close readings of on-campus and off-campus spaces—and their incisive critique of officially sanctioned university promotional *representations* of those spaces—suggests the promise of “co-research” that partners teachers and students in politically engaged collaborations centered outside the traditional classroom. As they point out, the goal of such critical mapping is not merely to understand the contradictions running through and beneath the university theoretically, but, through practice, to intensify them.

This team-authored essay is also notable for its historical grasp of the university in the present period. While framing their object of study as the neoliberal university, they caution against romanticizing the past. Emphasizing the constitutive exclusions and the militarism that structured the neoliberal university’s predecessor—what they insist on calling the “Cold War University”—the writers take their distance from influential strains within Critical University Studies that lament the passing of the “golden age” of higher education. The Welfare State was bound up with the *Warfare* State, they remind us, a state that brought with it a division of labor determined by gender and racial hierarchies. Rather than being an *alternative* to the “private,” “the public” has always itself been a class-bound space, determined by the needs of capitalism, even as those demands change over time. To call for “defending” or “restoring” the “public university,” then, risks reproducing the blindspots that historically defined prior notions of the “public.” While the authors do not—nor should we—go so far as to abandon the strategic value of upholding “the public” in this age of heightened privatization, they do ask us to think through (and beyond) such terms if we are to truly map an emancipatory educational praxis.

Concerning the question of how capital’s relationship to the public university has changed in our time, the co-authors offer the provocative perspective that the university is no longer principally a site of production (whether of labor power or of national culture) but has become chiefly a site of capital investment and accumulation. At the same time, such massive capital investments are creating new low-wage workplaces on our college campuses, generating what they argue is a potentially explosive contradiction between “expanding service and space,

contracting wages and work security.” Certainly, their assertions merit further research, including testing through organized struggle. At a minimum, this essay convincingly suggests how, within a university defined by its material-spatial practices and characterized by intensifying service worker exploitation, a practice of “schol-exodus” from the physical classroom may be just what the dining hall ordered.

Resisting Neoliberalism in the University— Classes, Campuses, Communities

Food service employees, of course, are not the only workers on campus. In this vein, **Jeffrey Noonan** and **Gary Zabel** offer compelling, largely complementary, theoretical accounts of the transformative potential of faculty union organizing in the current neoliberal conjuncture.

Noonan’s essay takes the form of summing up lessons from impasses hit by previous labor struggles, while Zabel moves from a review of core Marxist concepts to a more positive program for “revolutionary praxis in the neoliberal university.” Both comrades unfold an ambitious, grounded, strategic vision for a democratic socialist praxis that makes the campus faculty union not merely the vehicle for asserting particular immediate employee interests, but a mass organization that can play a key role in helping to organize broader popular mobilization. Modeling a rare fusion of scholarship and activism, Noonan and Zabel draw upon decades of personal, practical experience as labor activists—and also as Marxist philosophers—deriving positive programs for action in part from a close study of the real barriers that stand in the way of unlocking a situation’s radical potential.

Crucially, these barriers are grasped not only as matters of *external* constraint imposed upon university faculty from the outside, but also as *internal* limits, stemming from the self-conception of faculty members and faculty organizations. Both Noonan and Zabel argue that unless faculty are able to transcend wrong but still-dominant ideas about the meaning and function of not just *unions* but of *universities* and of *teaching* itself, the fight for faculty union rights may be lost in advance. In a neoliberal age of aggressive privatization, organized faculty can *potentially* play a vital role in changing the world...but only if they are willing to profoundly *change themselves* in the process, shedding individualist and elitist professional ideology as well as an overly narrow focus on one’s own backyard.

In “**Resolving the Contradictions of Academic Unionism**” Noonan traces three acute and interlocking contradictions that need to be overcome in order realize the transformative potential of an organized professoriate. First is the contradiction between a craft unionism that serves only its members, and the need for a social movement unionism that recognizes obligations towards society at large. Whereas the former focuses only on advocating for the immediate interests of those covered by collective bargaining agreements, the latter draws out the connections between the needs and interests of faculty as teachers and researchers and the broader needs of a democratic society, whose very existence requires the space for critical thought represented by higher education. Second, Noonan explores the contradiction between the struggles of faculty, and those of students, as well as other campus workers. Reflecting on

struggles on his own campus, Noonan shows how the failure to build strong alliances with these other crucial campus constituencies spells trouble for a faculty union movement. In a vicious circle, craft union narrowness on the faculty side both mirrors and encourages consumerist ideology on the side of students—turning potential allies into antagonists. The third contradiction for Noonan is that between building campus-centered movements to oppose attacks on faculty, students, and staff on a particular campus, and the need for a broader anti-austerity movement that takes aim at state policies (including regressive tax policies) that produce university budget crises in the first place.

With a dialectical insight that is at once sobering and yet objectively optimistic, Noonan argues that until faculty unions can overcome these three contradictions—barriers that are simultaneously matters of self-conception and matters of outward practice—they won't even be able to maintain what remains of the craft privileges they have eked out over the years. In an age of neoliberal austerity, he argues, faculty unions that fail to coalesce with broader social movements and that are unable to connect the struggle on campus to the broader social violence of austerity, can be easily isolated and defeated. In a political environment where austerity dons the garb of populist leveling, faculty rights (from academic freedom and job security, to state pensions or healthcare benefits) that are not deployed and defended in ways that connect to common social needs and values can easily be cast as undeserved special privileges, and all the more 'righteously' stripped.

It may be due to his Canadian location that Noonan does not dwell much on what we might put forth as a crucial *fourth* contradiction that continues to fracture and tongue-tie faculty power here in the US academy: the one between maintaining tenured professor privileges and the need for a united faculty movement with the critical mass necessary to defend higher education and extend the fight against austerity. Noonan argues astutely that tenured professors at public universities occupy a strategic position—possessing a mix of job security, cultural and economic resources, symbolic power, and workplace leverage that is rare among the unionized. Objectively speaking, this position *could* allow tenurable faculty to play a powerful leadership role in both campus-wide and broader social movements against austerity. Yes. And yet, often holding back such objective potential is a kind of privilege that enables and encourages the tenure-track or tenured faculty to disassociate from their non-tenure track (NTT) colleagues, and to consider themselves “lucky.”

Following Marxist critical race theorist Theodore Allen's indispensable work on white privilege (*Invention of the White Race*) we might understand tenured privilege dividing and dominating the academic teaching classes for purposes of social control and 'effective management'. It is both a system of super-exploitation for those NTTs at the bottom, as well as a strategy for winning obedience from tenurable faculty (who, no doubt, are increasingly stressed and overworked themselves as a result), a system that grants the tenured both psychological and material rewards for being “better than” the un-tenurable. But of course, without the NTTs, who outnumber them on many campuses and teach many more classes by virtue of their heavy course-loads, tenurable faculty lack the power they might have if allied alongside their disavowed colleagues. In this way, privilege becomes a barrier to political potential.

Helping to map the path towards such faculty power is the work of my UMass Boston colleague and veteran NTT organizer, **Gary Zabel**. Zabel's brilliant theoretical-practical

intervention, “**Critical Revolutionary Praxis in the Neoliberal University,**” should be considered must-reading for faculty union organizers. This contribution opens with a valuable discussion of the key Marxist concept of *praxis*, and moves forcefully to distinguish between two *different* notions of praxis: one associated with the transformation of nature (and of human beings themselves) through *labor*, and the other with the conscious effort to fundamentally transform the “second nature” of society itself. The latter, rephrasing Marx, Zabel refers to as *critical revolutionary praxis*. While both notions of praxis are in some sense “transformative”—entailing a change in both the world and the one acting upon it—they are distinct notions, if often confused and conflated. Whereas praxis of the first type is itself a defining feature of humanity, the latter sort requires a determined, strategic, collective political will that is far from spontaneous. Zabel’s demarcation of the two types of praxis is no mere academic hair-splitting. In clarifying the use of terms here, he is challenging many a would-be “transformative” intellectual and “radical” educator to reflect critically on their own praxis and where it falls. Within humanities education especially, the conflation and confusion of the two notions of praxis is especially common—perhaps even encouraged. The fact that the labor of humanities professors is focused on ideas and discussions *about* society, politics, and questions of social relations makes it all too easy to feel like praxis of the first sort (our labor) is *really* praxis of the second sort (critical, revolutionary). Are we not trained to believe that merely professing ideas in the classroom—or jotting them in the margins of student papers—constitutes, on its own, a kind of serious attempt to radically change the world for the better, “one student at a time”? Who among us has not indulged such a fantasy? And yet, as valuable, personally rewarding, and interesting as the former sort of praxis is, without the second sort there is no overcoming of capitalism, nor its attendant injustices, inequities, and mounting horrors. How, if at all, we must ask, does academic praxis of the first sort translate into praxis of the second kind?

Of course, for Zabel, the point of distinguishing these two notions of praxis is ultimately to bring them back together again, but in a sober and strategic—classically Marxist—way. If the spontaneous labor of people (including academics) is not enough to transform social relations beyond capitalism, it remains the case that the working class of society, whose labor produces and reproduces the social world, is the only collective agent capable of actually carrying through the project of critical revolutionary praxis, for it is the only group in society that has not only the interest but the power, collectively, to radically transform social relations—ultimately by taking control of the means of production, and supplanting capitalist class domination altogether.

Here we might call attention to a difference in the theoretical orientation informing the practically allied articles of Noonan and Zabel. Whereas Zabel roots his argument for the most part in the centrality of working class *interests and power*, Noonan grounds his in the foundation of socialist *ideas and ethics*. Noonan’s notion of *life-value* offers an added philosophical dimension—underscoring the importance of a hegemonic struggle that does not only make the case for working class power from working class *interests*, but argues that socialism is essential for supporting, cultivating, and protecting life-values on earth *in general*. Noonan’s socialist ethics of life-value offers us a critical supplement to the nonetheless crucial politics and appeals of class. The notion of class interest itself, after all, is not without its contradictions: between short-term and long-term interests, present and future interests, local and global interests, among others. Working class people have an interest in minimizing their time commuting to work (short term), but also in having an atmosphere that their grandchildren can

still breathe without choking (long term). Here enters the need for something like the eco-socialist ethos that Noonan foregrounds.⁶

Besides offering a method for adjudicating the contradictory interests and desires of a differentiated and far from self-identical global working class, Noonan's notion of life-value foregrounds a crucial ethical and cultural dimension of the struggle for socialism, one that scholar-activists may be well-equipped to help with. We need to change hearts and minds as well as to organize bodies on the line. The fight for public education and against austerity thus becomes not only an exercise in building working class power, but a chance to popularize the crucial social insight that neoliberal capitalism has become incompatible with basic life values and human need writ large. In this sense, there remains a need not just for teachers to become class-conscious *workers*, but to become *teachers of the public* in the broadest sense. Here Noonan differs somewhat from the MLA Subconference Collective. Noonan frames public higher education—and the realm of public services and institutions within capitalism more generally—as a contradictory site that remains of special strategic value. Certainly, such institutions cannot be thought of as autonomous 'socialist' enclaves within capitalism; they play a role in capitalist reproduction as well as in legitimating the system. Nonetheless the semi-autonomy of public institutions as zones not completely subsumed under the rule of capital and commodity exchange also means that they can be seen—and claimed—as 'civil commons' where a notion of life value other than that of capitalist profit maximization obtains. Public education and other public institutions thus represent sites to be defended and extended, the inheritance of valuable (if incomplete) social and working class struggles against capitalist domination. There is a danger in under-stating their autonomy, as well as in overstating it.

Zabel's class analysis of the position of both professors and students in contemporary neoliberal US capitalism further supports the view of higher education as a potential strongpoint for proletarian organizing. While recognizing that not all professors and not all students can be categorized as working class—some come from families that live off capital and the exploited labor of others, while others are now using the space of the university *itself* as a site of exploitation and profit-making—Zabel offers cogent arguments that most professors (tenured and tenure-track faculty included) can in fact be considered as working class. Notwithstanding perceived cultural differences or clear involvement in "hierarchies of command," the vast majority of professors still must sell their labor power to live. Nor does the possession of a Masters or a Ph.D. allow them to set up shop as any sort of independent petty bourgeois intellectual. In other words, unlike earlier historical periods, when intellectuals, academic and non-, often *did* stand 'objectively' outside the working class—a fact that gave rise to voluminous and vexatious debates about the fraught relationship between "intellectuals" and the workers—such is no longer the case: *most* professors are proletarianized, and not only the adjunct and contingent faculty who now constitute the majority of higher educators across the US. There is then an objective basis for unity and power within this proletarianized professoriate, and thus for optimism—if we can get our collective act together. Too often, however, this potential is dampened and dismembered by pervasive and persistent professional ideology. As both Noonan and Zabel argue, such ideology reinforces individualism, idealism, and elitism, all of which undermines the solidarity, strategy, and egalitarianism that is crucial to actualizing all this proletarian potential.

Building from his class analysis and an account of historical trends affecting higher education, Zabel derives a compelling strategy sketch for socialist professors in the academy

today—one that encompasses both the officially designated realms of classroom teaching and research, as well as the class-conscious labor organizing that remains the essence of a Marxist praxis. He offers us forward-looking proposals for how professors in the university who aspire to critical revolutionary praxis can go about concretizing those aspirations—working in alliance with students and other campus and off-campus workers. The latter project, Zabel notes, will be a learning experience for us professional teachers—often a humbling one. “In the academy above all,” he writes, “the educator must be educated.”

Starting from the here and now of a more ‘traditional’ classroom, **Bradley Freeman’s** essay “**Better Days Ahead’: Teaching Revolutionary Futures and Protesting the Present**” provides a forceful argument for the continued value of ‘old fashioned’ close reading, specifically of texts that engage themes of social rebellion and revolution. Interpreting novels and films that foreground historical ruptures, Freeman argues, can offer us a means of regenerating radical *hope*, a particularly crucial dimension if we are to energize Marxism in an era of neoliberalism. Against both a naive Obama-esque optimism and a cynical pessimism that sees in the present nothing but ‘more of the same,’ Freeman draws upon the work of Ernst Bloch as well as the queer Marxism of Kevin Floyd and José Muñoz to argue for a pedagogical practice that moves beyond critique of the current social order to discern within this order the actual and potential sites of social rupture, the “not yet within the now,” as Tillie Olsen once put it. And I invoke Olsen with intention. For Freeman appropriates the temporally and politically disruptive insights of queer theory for a critical project aimed at recovering overtly anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist literary and cultural texts, including proletarian literature of the Great Depression era (as well as contemporary eco-dystopian film). Freeman reminds us of how pro-communist literary texts of previous crisis eras, with their radical sense of historical possibility, can help us estrange the neoliberal present. The proletarian novel that Freeman examines, H.T. Tsiang’s *And China Has Hands* (1937), expands our sense of the possibilities of the (still-neglected, oft-derided) pro-communist literary genre. Of particular interest is this book’s insistence on framing its historical moment in explicitly international terms, a welcome emphasis. Interestingly, both of Freeman’s selected utopian-revolutionary texts ‘look to Asia’ for the hope on the horizon. Whether in the 1930s or the imagined year of 2031, revolutionary leadership assumes an ‘Eastern’ form, as if imagining a USAmerican revolution in the 21st century requires an Asian supplement.

If Freeman’s treatment of Tsiang’s *And China Has Hands* is provocative at a theoretical-methodological level (bringing proletarian literature studies through the wake opened by queer theory), his discussion of Bong Joon-Ho’s *Snowpiercer* (2013) stirs thinking about our immediate moment: a moment of ecological crisis and refugee crisis alike, of openly acknowledged (but often displaced) class inequalities and resurgent nationalisms—of Bernie Sanders as well as Donald Trump. Freeman affirms the radical rupture that *Snowpiercer* presents (Spoiler Alert #1). As he writes: “In the end...Bong condemns reformation and half measure, suggesting that it is the train itself,” symbolizing the capitalist system—or perhaps more precisely the bourgeois prohibition on *thinking* outside the naturalized assumptions of this system—“that must meet an explosive end.” The radicalism of the film, for Freeman, is to reveal that the problem with the Train is not merely a problem of leadership, or even of its class compartmentalization: *there can be no reforming The Sacred Engine*. The Train, we discover, requires a kind of human fuel that we must never accept—better to blow it sky high than let it barrel on, even under “more humane” leadership.

Paired with *Snowpiercer's* anti-reformist rupture is a suggestive radicalism at the level of revolutionary agency: whereas Curtis (played by Chris Evans, an American actor best known for comic book superheroes such as Captain America) appears for most of the film to be the anointed macho white “leader” of the excluded—and the hero of the film—appearances prove deceiving. (Spoiler Alert #2) Arriving in the front car, Curtis hesitates, tempted by mastermind Wilford’s offer to assume leadership of the train, as Wilford has intended all along. It is, instead, the non-white figures, Nam and Yona, the saboteur-security agents sprung from prison, who, though mistaken for self-serving drug addicts—and held in suspicion by their tail car liberators—keep the flame and the faith of revolution alive. Nam and Yona aim not only to reform the train, but to burst its confines completely. This radical aspiration remains a secret until the climactic moment—as if to speak of it too soon would undercut its very possibility. “You and your fucking gates,” Nam exasperates to Curtis and points out the gate that is so naturalized that “it might as well be a wall”: the gate leading out of the train altogether. As Freeman argues, *Snowpiercer* climaxes by rendering profound the cliché: quite literally, it’s necessary to think outside the box(car).

Freeman’s close reading of the film is lucid and compelling and his emphasis on the film’s enactment of a radical rupture fits with his Benjaminian frame.⁷ One wonders, however, how the film’s rapturous derailment might read differently if the cameras lingered longer on the sympathetic proles trapped in the back of the train. Presumably they too are sent to their deaths when cars roll down the mountain. Read literally at least, for virtually all of the rear car passengers, what began as an attempt at revolution ends in annihilation. Is this a story of liberation or of bare survival in the wake of tragic negation?

Furthermore, it may be important to appreciate the way that this “explosive” rupture comes about in the film. Nam and Yona’s radical rupture is made possible precisely through the ‘less radical’ efforts to reform or shift power *within* the train. Though we may retrospectively posit that the radical idea of bursting the train completely existed from the start, the ethical necessity and the concrete possibility of making this desire a reality does not become clear without “Curtis’ Revolution”, limited, prone to compromise, and even officially staged as it may have been. Without Curtis and company, Yona does not get to see the brutal child slavery that sustains the engine. Without Curtis’s ‘misguided’ and, yes, even co-optable crusade, Nam does not gain access to the gate he wants to blow wide open.

Transposing *Snowpiercer's* allegory back to today’s USA, then: Might it be possible that despite, or even because of, its reformist “naivete,” the Sanders “revolution” may bring about more radical possibilities than it set out to create? More radical possibilities than a more openly “revolutionary” approach could have brought into being? Calling forth revolutionary agency that lives on even after Sanders meets his end? Thus we might ask: If Bernie Sanders be Curtis....*where are Nam and Yona?*

As radical as *Snowpiercer* may be in terms of its explosive anti-reformism and its surprise displacement of white macho saviors, the film can also be read as a kind of symptom, or—perhaps more charitably—as a critique of a certain kind of symptomatically limited radicalism, a radicalism characteristic of a certain contemporary ecological anti-capitalism in particular. To be blunt: the film represents an attempt to imagine a revolution *without a working class*—a revolution of the excluded. Curtis’s is a revolution led by members of a class of ‘passengers’ who

have no material lever on the productive forces; they have only their will and wits, their courage and their numbers. Even more so with Nam and Yona: this is a revolution that has no hope of changing society...but might still manage to blow it up. Far from an aberration, isn't this inability to imagine the working class as a revolutionary subject quite typical of radical thought today? Nor is this meant as a narrow critique of the film for some kind of 'petty bourgeois ideology.' Arguably, at least here in the United States, the coordinates of radical imagination and (im)possibility often take something like this form: disenfranchised and discontented white middle-to-working classes demanding redistribution, but prone to co-optation and the restoration of past privilege; criminalized and incarcerated non-white minorities more open to a radical opposition, but lacking a practicable grip of the productive forces that thus appear as nothing but a kind of racing prison. Indeed, the working class that presumably is necessary to the functioning of the privileged front cars in *Snowpiercer* is not just *not* politicized, it is virtually invisible—in their place stand endless ranks of soldiers, their faces masked as if to bar the thought that they too might be won to the side of the rebellion. There is no possibility for ideological struggle, no one to win over, in *Snowpiercer's* revolutionary universe. This may indeed make the film a fitting allegory for the revolutionary imagination of our polarized times—but not a very hopeful one.

Complicating ecological-egalitarian aspirations further is the way that the rulers of the Train themselves invoke environmental catastrophe—and even environmental sustainability!—in order to justify their continued class stratified “order.” How can the chaos of rebellion be permitted when cold frozen death lies just the other side of the walls? Quite provocatively in a moment where much overt anti-capitalism appears to be coming from an environmentalist place, *Snowpiercer* paradoxically reminds us both of the impending horror of global warming-related climate collapse, *and* of the profound ideological danger of allowing appeals to “Nature” to justify ruling-class calls for “order” in the face of tail-car rebellion.

John Maerhofer's essay, “**Lukács, Mariátegui, and the Dialectical Roots of Edu-Activism,**” similarly “looks East”—and back to the interwar proletarian novel—for his concrete example of “edu-activism” in the classroom. Together with Freeman he reminds us of a history that ruling forces would have us forget: the history of a Trans-Pacific *Proletariat*. Maerhofer too covers a great deal of ground, ranging across time and space, from institutional to textual analysis, from the 1920s to the present, from Japan and Peru to the halls of CUNY. He begins with a provocative critique of the (*PMLA*-approved) notion of the “semi-public intellectual,” showing why it's a conceptual copout. In its unquestioning acceptance of the privileged position of “intellectuals” who stand apart from ‘the public’ to which they eclectically relate, this discourse stands in stark contrast to—and helps to disavow—the radical pedagogical tradition. Associated with the name Paulo Freire and his classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, this tradition starts out by acknowledging the special authority offered to intellectuals and teachers within class society, but moves to theorize the methods through which this often oppressive hierarchical relationship can be transformed and overcome. The latter move, Maerhofer points out, is missing from this latest trend.

But the vital intervention that Maerhofer makes is more than calling us to return to Freire; he roots Freire both conceptually and historically, in relationship to his predecessors and to our contemporary pedagogical moment. With help not just from Freire but from Georg Lukács and José Carlos Mariátegui, Maerhofer helps us to see why a pedagogy of the oppressed, though it

may begin in the classroom, must not end there. His essay shows us how these well-known revolutionary Marxist thinkers are also *pedagogical* thinkers, helping us to identify the ways in which their insights—and the classroom space itself—remain as relevant as ever in our current moment of enduring capitalist crisis.

The literary text that brings Maerhofer's essay home is the proletarian novel by Takiji Kobayashi, *Kani Kosen (The Crab Cannery Ship)*, a work that expresses in an accessible form several of the key lessons that Maerhofer teases out of theoretical work from Kobayashi's Hungarian and Peruvian contemporaries. In this way, Maerhofer exemplifies the revolutionary internationalism for which he argues. His essay spans four continents—North America, Europe, South America, Asia—drawing on the work of comrades *then and there* to better illuminate our radical grasp of the *here and now*. To activate the latent potential in our proletarian classrooms, his essay suggests, may require intercontinental syllabi.

If Freeman and Maerhofer offer us positive pedagogical suggestions—recovering crucial concepts and fanning the spark of hope—the *critical* dimension of *Scholactivism* is in full force with **Gregory Meyerson** and **Stephen Ferguson's** blockbuster essay, **“Shred of Truth: Antinomy and Synecdoche in the work of Ta-Nehisi Coates.”** This astounding co-authored work exposes major blindspots in the writings of a contemporary who has quickly been established as an authority on the topic of race in America, and who is now showing up on college syllabi across the country. Even more significantly, Ferguson and Meyerson follow the cracks in Coates' outlook to deeper sources, producing an eye-opening account of both the material facts and the pervasive misconceptions surrounding racial oppression and state violence in the contemporary United States.

Meyerson and Ferguson deploy the tools of both literary and of statistical analysis, as well as a deep grasp of the historical analyses of Ted Allen (*The Invention of the White Race*), to offer an immanent critique of the key tropes as well as the historical and sociological assumptions that define and delimit Coates' “world”—both in his best-selling *Between the World and Me* and in his influential articles for *The Atlantic*. Working through statistical evidence Coates' categories can't deal with, and that many in our movements resist as well, they show in detail the inadequacy of “white privilege” theories that paint *all* whites—even impoverished working class whites—as “beneficiaries” of anti-Black racism. Parsing the actual statistics of police killings and mass incarceration in the US, Meyerson and Ferguson look the stark and appalling racial disparities in the face, but without falling into the common trap that mistakes differential oppression for a universal caste-race privilege.

To put it bluntly, Ferguson and Meyerson show us how the fact that young Black men are being subjected to an outrageous and disproportionate rate of brutal state violence—and *they are*—must not lead us to the mistaken view that all whites are akin to “guards,” and all blacks to “prisoners” within the US race-class system. Such a view, implied by Coates' work, overlooks at least two crucial and defining facts of our era: 1) Even the “lesser” rate of incarceration and police kill rate for *white* males in the USA is through the roof compared to other countries. And 2) in the era of neoliberal multiculturalism, the ruling class of the USA is no longer an exclusively white club. Their article brings into view crucial complexities in the actually existing race-class conjuncture, realities that are at once unthinkable within the textual “world” of Ta-Nehisi Coates, and often silenced within major currents of the existing anti-racist movement. Key

to their method is a thoroughgoing critique of the way that Coates consistently slips from the realm of ideology to that of history, taking as descriptive of reality what is in fact a (reactionary) political intervention *in* that reality. This slippage characterizes Coates' account of both the past and the present: both the white supremacist polemics of J.C. Calhoun, and the Dream of white folks' "bubblegum and ice cream" privilege that Coates saw broadcast on television as a child growing up in West Baltimore. That Calhoun or the 80s suburban sit coms of the Reagan Era paint a world without exploited white workers—where all whites lived in privilege towering above all Blacks—does not make it so. Our co-authors make clear why it is crucial that anti-racist analysis, in its urgency to combat reactionaries, does not reproduce the blindspots of their rhetoric.

Also key is Ferguson and Meyerson's deft attention to what we might call the dangerous allure of synecdoche—that literary term for representing a *part* as standing for the *whole*—especially when it comes to matters of state violence and racism in the USA. A "shred of truth," as their title suggests, is seldom something that can be directly extrapolated into the totality of that truth. Such unmediated magnification tends to turn that "shred" into something altogether misleading. Our co-authors here parallel the lyrical theorizing of Demetrius Noble, as well as my own essay, "The Petrified and the Proletarian: Ta-Nehisi Coates & Richard Wright,"⁸ by placing special emphasis on Coates' central trope of "the black body"—*as if there were only one, as if all black bodies were the same*. Their acute conclusion on this point is worth quoting at length:

In the hands of Coates, the 'Black Body,' which seems to be a corporeal, material body, is in fact a reifying abstraction severed from the historical materiality of class struggle, the division of labor, and social relations of production. The abstract concept of the "Black Body" replaces the concrete—and contradictory—experiences of the Black lumpenproletariat, working class, petit bourgeoisie, and bourgeoisie.

Meyerson and Ferguson identify what seems to me a critical danger facing today's anti-racist movement: the urge to dramatize the severity of the problem of racist state violence can lead to a distortion of the nature of the problem itself, paradoxically weakening the antiracist movement by making it seem like whites—even the increasingly superfluous and impoverished, downwardly mobile white working class—inhabit an entirely different "world" from the Black people being targeted by police violence and hyper incarceration. It follows from such an outlook that whites cannot relate to the struggle against state repression, except in some distant "allied" role—after all, according to this dominant view, murderous and excessive state violence is not something that happens to white folks...so it's not their fight.

But it very much is "their" fight—is *our* fight. As Ferguson & Meyerson show, the entire US working class is now subject to a historically unprecedented level of repressive brutality—with the urban black poor bearing the brunt of it. The point is not at all to minimize the horror of what is being done to the hyper-incarcerated Black "surplus population" of the USA's collapsing ghettos; the point is rather to reveal the possibility of going beyond calling out injustice to actually changing this situation, showing the potential for broad working class unity on this crucial front. As our authors put it, the bottom line is this: "Any effort to reform criminal justice policy in the United States must have a broad working class base in order to make a difference."

However valuable Ta-Nehisi Coates' voice has been as a catalyst for popularizing discussion about persistent racial disparities in the USA—and I believe it has been—Meyerson & Ferguson argue forcefully that Coates' writings dangerously obscure what is both needed and possible: a broad interracial working class alliance to oppose racist, capitalist state repression. Despite—or perhaps even because of—the poetic power of his account, Coates' outlook promises to shadow-box American racism rather than to uproot it.

The space for scholactivism in the classroom, of course, is framed by broader institutional forces which condition the freedom to take up controversial themes. **Ian Butcher's** essay “**Student Evaluations, Neoliberal Managerialism, and Networks of Mistrust**” calls our attention to problems with what is often seen as a rather innocuous feature of academic life: end-of-semester student evaluations. Building on research that shows the inadequacy of student evals as a means of capturing actual student learning, Butcher examines the rise of the eval—and in particular of its anonymous and highly quantified form—as a symptom of the neoliberal reshaping of the university since the 1970s. Offering a robust historicization of neoliberalism in education, he locates the spread of student evaluations in relationship to the rising commodification of higher education—from growing privatization, marketization, and a concern with financial bottom lines, to the rising emphasis on protecting the quality of the college “brand,” even amidst growing casualization of academic labor, and the rise of administrative managerial strategies that hinge on increased surveillance and data-driven “accountability” measures.

Butcher brings out how student evaluations have functioned in this mix as a three-pronged administrative power-play: alienating students from teachers, teachers from other teachers, and teachers from themselves. Evals signal to students that the instructor's authority is “conditional, probationary, and granted only at the discretion of the administration.” At the same time, these quantitative (and often percentile/comparative) evaluations encourage competition between teachers, rather than the cooperation and collaboration that is necessary for developing constructive dialogue about teaching, which must include open discussion of struggles as well as successes. Furthermore, by making aggregated numerical representations of teaching more important than actual observation or analysis of teaching itself, evaluations encourage a split within individual teachers, encouraging them to perform entertaining “schticks” while discouraging passions, personalities, and rigorous academic standards that are unlikely to win popularity points.

Butcher suggests that we radically reform student evaluations, stripping them of their anonymity, and replacing the false concreteness of stand-alone number-bubbles with evaluative narratives that will allow (and compel) students to provide valuable contextual information about their education expectations and experiences. Not only would such evaluative narratives give teachers more useful and fully framed feedback, but they could become the springboard for actual conversations between student and teacher. Indeed, it strikes me upon re-reading Butcher's essay that one of the more insidious features of the prevalent student evaluation form is precisely that guarantee of anonymity. The standard justification of this guarantee of course is that it assures the student that they are “protected” from possible retaliation from the instructor. Sounds fair enough. But the underlying assumption that this ‘protective’ message smuggles in is quite unsettling: namely that a teacher should be expected to take criticism of teaching style or methods as a personal attack, rather than, say, as an occasion for critical reflection and constructive dialogue. Generally, as Butcher draws out, evaluations prompt students to assume a

view of education as commodity, enabling them to fulfill their consumer duty by quantifying ‘satisfaction,’ while subtly suggesting that actual criticisms need to be offered secretly, not to the teacher directly, but to the managers in charge. His essay calls for faculty to re-assert control over the evaluation process, both in order to “advance a more teacher and student-friendly vision of education,” but also in order to short-circuit the neoliberal managerial schemes that judge and rule by numbers stripped of context. His closing proposal thus merges a call for pedagogical solidarity with a technique of principled anti-neoliberal sabotage.

Learning in the Shadow of State Terror: A Poetic Interlude

Opening our poetic interlude, and expressing an unapologetically Black proletarian outlook, **Demetrius Noble**’s work demonstrates the possibility of fusing a layered class-conscious and anti-racist critical analysis with popular lyric. Laced with vivid and accessible images as well as challenging communist concepts, these pieces take up crucial political imperatives: 1) to dramatize the crimes of the racist, ruling-class establishment; 2) to push beyond feelings of outrage in the face of these crimes to raise the question of “Why?” and of “What is to be done?”; 3) to challenge the ideological, organizational, and subjective limitations and contradictions of the emancipatory movement itself; and 4) to emotionally rally its listener/readers to “**Dig Deep**” to overcome both the external and internal obstacles that we are up against. Those who have had the experience of hearing D Noble perform these pieces will testify to the added force they carry in person.

As their subtitles suggest, Noble’s poems “**I am Not that Corpse: A Working Praxis for Black Lives Matter**” and “**A Martyr without a Cause, or Much Ado About Trayvon**” issue polemical challenges, not only to a racist police state that steals the lives of the innocent, but to a social justice/protest movement whose theory and practice still lags far behind the needs of the crisis at hand. Invoking pervasive protest chants (“I AM Trayvon Martin,” “I AM Michael Brown,” “We ARE Eric Garner”...) these poems simultaneously express deep sympathy for the fallen while exploring the problematic implications of identifying political movement too-closely with the slain bodies of victims. Noble worries that what needs to become a revolutionary movement, alive and anchored in the present, may come to resemble something more like a zombie march—heads bowed, eyes fixed on images past that can’t be changed, or learned from politically—only mourned. “I am *NOT* Trayvon Martin/I am *NOT* Michael Brown/I am *NOT* Eric Garner” Noble attests: “I’m still *alive*,” And yet, he adds, “The truth is we’d rather be dead.” In ways that echo the above discussion of Ta-Nehisi Coates, Demetrius confronts us with the lure of the corpse: the way its shadow offers to shield us from responsibility, from developing ideas, actions, and organization that can truly transform our present—as if an oppressive social order could ever be overthrown simply by reading back to it a list of its crimes.

In both poems, D Noble confronts us with the gaping chasm between the radical demands of the situation and the domesticated tropes and tepid modes of practice—from slogans, to vigils, to ritualized non-violent protest marches—that threaten to restrain the antiracist movement. Provocatively taking up the famous signs of Trayvon Martin’s murdered innocence—his Skittles, his Arizona Iced Tea—Noble demands that we shift the frame, in global terms. “What is/Who is Trayvon within the global cartography of black death?” he asks. The billions of Black people living on dimes a day, cannot even dream of “tasting the rainbow,” while migrant laborers from Latin America face both *ICE* and the *Tea Party* in Arizona daily—

why don't we know what *their* last meals were? Though Barack Obama may express sympathy for Trayvon as the son he never had, he continues to drop bombs on Black youth across North Africa almost daily; D's poems sniff out such liberal-imperial hypocrisy.

Noble's work further explores the dangerous lure of reimagining our present conditions as merely a repetition of past ones—of seeing Trayvon Martin as merely some second coming of Emmet Till. As he asks, "Ain't it ironic how commodified iconography of yesterday can sabotage our ability to properly theorize today?" Noble's poems deny us an easy escape. Relentlessly anti-sentimental and hostile to conciliatory nostalgia, Noble's "**Homecoming**" reminds us of how much life "outside" the official mass incarceration system still resembles a prison for the proletarianized.

In a starkly contrasting style, but an allied spirit, **Jill McDonough's** poems present us with poignant, fragmentary eye-witness reflections on humanity trapped—yet still breathing, still grasping—in spaces of incarceration, commodification, and empire. Her opening poem, like many of her deeply researched yet accessible lyrics, captures a sense of despair, and yet, somehow, of hope. Exploring the case of "**Amos D. Squire, Chief Physician of Sing Sing, 1914-25,**" McDonough presents us with the horror that a doctor could preside over 138 state executions, but also with a revelation: this death-doctor eventually *quits*. Whether it is sympathy with the condemned or sheer psychological disturbance that leads this man to desire to *touch* the living victim whose death he is supposed to verify, Squire's long arc to decision is a reminder of the fact that people can change—even executioners—but also of how protracted that process of change can be.

The last and shortest poem here, "**Joe Hill's Prison,**" captures at least three crucial intersecting themes that run through McDonough's work: a historical recognition that USAmerican judicial violence has often been used in ways that have more to do with maintaining ruling class power than with meting out justice; an ironic lament that this historical memory itself is under threat of being plowed under and erased, just as Joe Hill's prison has been replaced by a neon and brick "Sizzler" restaurant; and a breathtaking juxtaposition of majesty and violence, which McDonough often lets us glimpse, but seldom in such a devastating manner as in these closing lines describing the mountains Joe Hill looked out on "Rising purple up beyond the wall where he was shot."

But if McDonough opens with the historical reminder of an executioner's heartbeat revival and closes with a reflection on a martyr whose deathbed lies buried under neon and brick, her other poems provide us with more contemporary, and in some ways more personally intimate accounts of human beings stuck in dehumanizing spaces and situations. They range from a reflection on the horror-irony of Starbucks coffee being advertised as reward for those Guantanamo detainees who are willing to "tell us everything we want to know" ("**Coffee Everyone**"), to accounts of the forgotten riverbanks of Blackwater, before it became a synonym for Mercenary Inc. ("**Memorius: Blackwater**"), to personal accounts of teaching literature and composition to prisoners in the Massachusetts State Correctional system. Notably, McDonough's prison snapshots humanize those locked behind bars not by sentimentalizing them as pure victims but by letting us glimpse their struggles, as inmates but also as *students*, as readers and writers dealing with painful memories as well as classroom pressures, and as *women*, somehow finding ways to express their sense of *style* even after bright colors and

delicate textures have been all but banned from their world (“**Women’s Prison Every Week**”). McDonough’s work confronts us with the fact that many who are locked in the booming prison industry *have* committed heinous acts against other people, while calling us to reflect on how wise or fair it is to label someone for life based on actions taken decades ago, not to mention the fact that many who have committed still greater atrocities continue to walk free (“**Where You Live**”).

Running through many of these poems is an insistence on the power of imagination, as a way of transforming not only individual lives, but, potentially, society writ large. As McDonough puts it at the end of “Where You Live”: “Prison cell, cathedral: we imagined them, invented. Built them / around our bodies, or the bodies those spaces would hold.” And yet, just as the desire to be a writer does not itself put the words on a page, so McDonough reminds us that the wish to see war criminals punished—or the over-punished freed—is but a whimsy without the work to back it up. Her poems hold out the promise of human redemption in even the coldest of concrete confines, without lulling us with the fantasy that such radical reconstruction can be achieved short of sustained and shell-shedding effort. Such work is a bit easier to imagine—and even to enjoy—accompanied by a voice like McDonough’s, one that continues to play as it pulverizes, refusing not just the conditions she confronts, but also the petrified straight face of pure moral judgment. Her poems dance the line between taking oppressors seriously, and laughing their wasted wieners right off stage (“**Dear Gaybashers**”).

Virtual Universities, Digital Activists, and their Discontents

Effective praxis requires an understanding of the situation that we now face. Indisputably, ‘technology,’ and digital internet technologies in particular, form part of that terrain. **Ali Shehzad Zaidi** offers a broad and quite damning view of recent trends in digital higher education in “**The Promise and Peril of the Virtual University.**” Revisiting the utopian propaganda of inevitable “progress” that helped to justify the “gold rush” into online education over a decade ago, Zaidi calls attention to the role played by corporate interests and their political allies, who mapped out this field as a profit-making opportunity from the beginning. By no means a technophobe, he concedes the obviously positive pedagogical potentials of the internet but calls attention to a number of serious dangers, both political-economic and pedagogical. While proponents of online education point to the greater access that digital platforms have provided non-traditional students, for instance, this same “flexible” system has exerted a downward pressure on faculty wages and autonomy, allowing institutions to staff classes by pulling from a broader pool of distant adjunct labor, while imposing new forms of standardization from above. Similarly, whatever its benefits, the institutionalization of email (and other online platforms such as Blackboard) has led to an effective expansion of the workday. Even when it comes to a topic such as academic research, the internet, Zaidi argues, remains a very mixed bag.

One may detect in Zaidi’s account faint touches of nostalgia for the days when libraries were actually full of books, but what he offers us at root is an incisive class analysis of ostensibly value-neutral, “technological” developments, unmasking the administrator and ruling class power-play that is veiled by the irresistible rhetoric of “progress.” To be sure, Zaidi gives us an overview of some of the worst abuses, both nationwide, such as the for-profit ventures like University of Phoenix, and internationally—the notorious diploma mills—

reminding us of the outrageous fortunes that have been made at the expense of underprepared students, exploited faculty, and hoodwinked taxpayers. But even more worrisome may be the way in which ostensibly *non*-profit institutions have integrated similar (“for profit”) priorities and approaches. Zaidi thus points us to his own institution of SUNY Canton, where he personally witnessed the slide of *introductory Spanish* courses into the online ether, with serious negative effects on student learning and persistence.

While privatization and austerity—the massive state defunding of *both public and private* higher education—have certainly laid the basis for such profit-drive absurdity, Zaidi argues that the process underway is not just a side effect of the drive to balance state-strapped budgets. (After all, university administrations continue to magically find funds for costly new sports stadiums even while announcing major faculty cuts.) The project at work, Zaidi argues, is not simply about commodification and profit-maximization *within* higher ed itself—objectionable as that is—but a project of class-based social control more broadly, concerned with assuring the steady flow of profits to the employers *across the entirety of society*. “Virtual education deprives teachers of workplace autonomy,” he writes, “which accounts in part for its powerful corporate backers.” And as for the teachers, so for the students. “Rather than educating students to become informed citizens, administrators promote vocational training to create an atomized, docile and dispirited workforce.” In his conclusion, Zaidi rallies us to collective resistance, while conceding a deep pessimism about the state of the industry as a whole. “This is no time to be polite,” he writes. “The time for revolt is at hand.”

The developments charted and criticized by Zaidi also create new vectors of resistance and opportunities for struggle, against the grain of the neoliberal project. The high-level concerns about the university “brand,” as well as the university’s expansion into online space, both involve creating not just new structures of exploitation and alienation, but new vulnerabilities as well. I am reminded here of David Harvey’s work in his book *Rebel Cities*, where he analyses the contradictions of cultural capital and in particular the dynamics of monopoly rent. In Harvey’s account, contemporary capital’s drive to bestow cities—and thus the products and services *from* that city— with an aura of “unique”-ness and “authenticity” does not only artificially drive up prices and thus buffer profits; it also creates potential leverage for labor and other progressive movements to rally public attention and demand reforms—even radical ones—in the spirit of forcing the city to live up to the noble image its “authentic” brand proclaims. Does not the brand-investment of neoliberal universities similarly lay them open to analogous struggles? Similarly with the expansion of university life into cyberspace.

As **Xavier Best** and **Efadul Huq** argue in their co-authored essay, “**Untangling the Scholactivist Web,**” the internet—and social media in particular—remains a crucial terrain for activist work in the current period. Enabling activists to spread images and information across national boundaries, social media embodies an “adversarial spirit” that challenges both mainstream media and government accounts, expressing a popular desire for more participatory and “non-mediated” engagement with current events and pressing issues. Through a dialogic and fragmentary essay that itself bears the traces of a Facebook friendship, Best and Huq offer us what they call, a “user review of social media platforms as tools in our [scholactivist] toolbox.”

Best and Huq argue that it is both possible and necessary to bring to social media “informed and relevant critique” and a commitment to creating the time and space for “critical friendships.” They write not to “eulogize” social media, but in a hope that social media activism may continue to foster solidarities across boundaries, countering and outflanking the state attempts to intimidate public dissent through mass surveillance or win outright popular consent for barbarism through the glamor of “digital militarism.” Paying special attention to social media struggles grounded in Palestinian solidarity and in opposition to state violence (from Gaza to Ferguson), Best and Huq provide powerful examples of how tactical social media activism has disrupted dominant state-sanctioned narratives.

At the same time, as a common space owned and managed by private corporations, social media platforms remain far from “unmediated.” Best and Huq call our attention not only to the catalyzing power but also the co-optive and dissipating dangers of social media that simultaneously connect people and yet often encourage fast and superficial rather than slow and substantive interactions, reinforcing individualist, consumerist, and identitarian tendencies, always with a corporate eye towards data-mining and marketing (not to mention a state eye towards surveillance and repression). Nor are the only dangers those coming from the “outside”: Huq and Best urge us to consciously struggle against the bad habits and sectarian tendencies that plague the left on social media. The fast-paced nature of social media interactions, as well as the lack of personal familiarity or accountability that frame much public discussion, easily morph urgent exchanges into antagonisms, leading to public and prideful disputes that threaten to disrupt or dismember much-needed organization. Nonetheless, despite its dangers, Best and Huq argue forcefully against the anti-social media (and anti-“PC”) position of a figure such as Michael Chait, whose complaints about millennials betray the elitism of an established writer objecting to commoners crashing his party. The radical potential—but also the challenge—of social media scholactivism lies in critically embracing this new commons, while developing structures and habits, online and off, that can enable activists to transcend sectarianism, defend against state surveillance, disrupt dominant narratives of oppression, and foster critical solidarities that defy existing social boundaries.

Sophia McLennen offers a forceful, sympathetic reappraisal of youth activists and social media users in her essay “**What’s Wrong with Slactivism: Confronting the Neoliberal Assault on Millennials.**” Drawing our attention to the uncomfortable similarity between Right and Left denigration of the new generation and its activism, McLennen defends so-called “Slacktivists,” showing how the “generational warfare” aimed at them is both symptomatic of and complicit with a broader neoliberal assault on youth. Her essay refutes misconceptions about millennials being a politically un-engaged generation and makes thoughtful arguments for both the effectiveness and the promise of new modes of millennial politics that aim to reclaim the power of spectacle and “to make politics pleasurable.” A new terrain of political engagement is already emerging, she argues, one that complicates traditional notions of “public vs. private” as well as “entertainment vs. seriousness,” mixing suspicion of traditional authorities with hope for the future. Contrary to being the “worst generation ever,” for McLennen, millennials are “poised to be the best generation of political actors we have ever seen.”

Effectively anticipating the massive youth-based (and social media-driven) movement for Bernie Sanders, McLennen counters the “either/or” logic that suggests online “clicktivism” begins and ends at the “like” button. She points us to recent studies showing how, in fact,

social media users tend to be *more* politically and socially engaged than non-users, and how millennials tend to be *more* socially engaged than their elders were when they were that age. Arguing for the effectiveness of hash-tagged social media efforts associated with #OccupyWallStreet, #BlackLivesMatter, her essay provocatively suggests that the teachers ought to start learning from their students rather than complaining about them. Indeed, McLennen usefully points out how educators who demonize “slacker” youth become complicit with a neoliberal state apparatus that seeks to justify the criminalization, repression, and de-legitimation of ever greater numbers of young people. Bringing in the socio-economic reality of millennial lives, McLennen points out how one-sided and unrepresentative the ruling stereotypes of “spoiled youth” today really are. Most millennials are struggling to survive: mounting tuition bills and debt loads on the one hand, stagnant wages and high unemployment rates on the other, all the while living in the shadow of an increasingly militarized racist police state. That 43% of today’s millennial are non-white and many from single parent households further gives the lie to the myth of the over-privileged slacker. The helicopters hovering over these kids’ heads don’t belong to their parents.

McLennen convincingly exposes a powerful —and disabling— irony: ostensibly radical critiques by would-be leftist scholar-activists may in fact manifest an insidious conservatism, reproducing a neoliberal cynicism and passivity in the guise of exposing it in their students. Certainly social media activists often deploy the “marketing” strategies of capitalism, but they also reach beyond them—and often they are acutely aware of the impurity of the imperfect tools they are using. She urges would-be scholar-activists to “reconsider knee-jerk participation in millennial bashing,” beginning with our own blogs and Facebook pages. Perhaps, rather than posturing as the elder critics of youth activists, McLennen suggests, we should join with them—online and off—and build together, learning as we go. McLennen’s recent book, co-authored with an undergraduate at Penn State, suggests the great possibilities, even as the rarity of such a teacher-student collaboration indicates how much more intergenerational work remains to be done.

Doing What We Can from Where We Are: Personal Histories, Case Studies

The essays in our section on “Personal Histories, Case Studies” offer narratives of struggles from various sides of the tenure line. They range from stories of integrating activism into university life (Van Der Meer), to stories of leaving academia entirely to link up with community activism beyond the college walls (Cortez), to reflections on how best to marshal the privileges of tenure in a sustainable and progressive direction (Leitch), to accounts of both complicity and of solidarity from the “dark side” of (mid-level) university administration (K. Hogan and DiLeo, respectively). Each author reflects on decades of praxis, offering us lessons for today, caution as well as inspiration. **Jeffrey DiLeo’s “Top Cover: on Administrative Activism in the Neoliberal Academy,”** speaks to the importance of seeking allies in what might seem to be unlikely places. Writing from the perspective of a contingent faculty member turned tenure-line professor turned dean, DiLeo argues forcefully against the idea that going into academic administration necessarily involves joining “the dark side.” He urges faculty to judge administrators as they ought to judge one another (or their students): by practice, not position. While acknowledging the actually existing problem of administrative bloat, DiLeo suggests that, especially in a climate of neoliberalism—where economic and ideological forces compel the university to become more and more financially driven—there is both a basis and a need to

develop alliances between progressive administrators and faculty. Such an alliance is made doubly difficult however, he argues, when faculty cling to the notion that administration is the “sick” part of the university, a “dark side” from whence no good can come. This one-sided outlook impairs potential alliances both by discouraging progressive faculty from entering administrative positions of influence in the first place, while also curtailing in advance the dialogue that might lead to an alliance of concerns. “The problem with placing all administration on the ‘dark side,’” DiLeo writes, “is that one assumes what they are going to do when the heavy weather hits rather than actually working—or struggling—with administration to make the better decision.”

A further danger in this black-and-white outlook is that the divisions among the faculty themselves become white-washed, obscuring the grip of individualism, careerism, and various complicit practices. Such divisions and contradictions can be found at all levels of higher education—and of society, one might add—which is precisely what necessitates struggle and makes politics possible in the first place. DiLeo usefully challenges a prevalent moralism, one that is infused with a kind of academic “workerism” that too-quickly conflates position with political line, location with practice. He urges us to judge each individual administrator (or faculty, or student, etc.) on their own values and actions, and, to be sure, his own informed and passionate criticism of neoliberalism speaks to the existence of sincere and progressive deans in academia today.

At the same time, DiLeo’s focus on *individual* values and actions contradicts somewhat his acknowledgement of the reality and detrimental effects of administrative bloat as a historical and institutionalized phenomenon. That is to say, if it is possible for this or that administrator to be or to become an ally in the anti-neoliberal (anti-austerity, anti-privatization, etc.) coalition, is it possible for *all* administration to do so? Who is likely to be won over and who, by virtue of their structural position, is deeply vested in the current state of things? DiLeo’s focus on the exception to the rule risks suggesting that there are no rules at all. No doubt the pervasive “dark side” metaphor goes too far—and he is right to criticize it—but is there not a thing called institutional gravity? His essay thus raises the question—and it is a vitally important one, one that must be asked in each particular context, at each institution, and in each struggle: How are we to draw the line? How do we draw the friend/enemy distinction in the neoliberal university? Who can be appealed to on the basis of common interests and who must be struggled against?

DiLeo’s criteria for answering such questions would appear to reject a structural-institutional analysis of positions and offices within the university in favor of the idea that progressive administrators are those who work to “mitigate pain and increase attainment” for those their decisions affect. This sounds quite reasonable. Still, DiLeo’s sketch of the duties of a progressive administrator demand some scrutiny. As he writes: admin’s job is to “calibrat[e] the educational interests of faculty and student with the external conditions that prohibit their attainment. Once this is determined, the role of the administrator needs to be one of maximizing conditions for achievement.” Again, all sounds good, until one presses the question, what do we mean—and what do we accept—as “external conditions”?

Here we need to put some pressure also on one of DiLeo’s organizing analogies, the one that likens university administration to the “captain” of a ship. The problem here is not just that

this analogy appears to assume the need for a kind of authoritarian leadership. The deeper problem lies in how this analogy likens the “external” factors of neoliberalism to the “weather” or the “stormy waters” that a captain and his ship must face as ocean beyond their control. Is there not here a danger of reifying and, indeed, naturalizing social and political conditions, as if they weren’t themselves the products of human practice? Of treating as a navigable but immutable “outside” what is not in fact outside at all? In an era of neoliberalism and financialization, austerity is routinely justified precisely by painting a picture of “bad weather” that is “beyond our control,” as if the budget is fixed, as if the spending priorities are set in stone, as if the rich or the corporations could not be further taxed, as if the salaries of upper administration were off the table, even as faculty are first for the chopping block—as if there is no way to mobilize together against such things. It might be argued that one of the main ideological tasks of managing the neoliberal agenda is precisely to get people to see the radically political situation in which they are living as if it were as immutable as the waves of the ocean. DiLeo’s navigational metaphor may still catch wind so long as we are talking about mitigating the dangers of the neoliberal storm, but it tends to sag when we begin to contemplate how the university can become a space for trying to change that neoliberal climate itself. What can those in the university contribute to such political climate change? How might administrators give “top cover” to those seeking to bring it about? How can administrators use their positions of influence to enable other actors who may not be as tightly bound to official office requirements? Notwithstanding the limitations of this nautical analogy, DiLeo’s challenge to progressive or radical faculty to occupy administrative positions rather than merely decry those who hold them remains a useful provocation, one that, at the very least, pushes us towards finding a strategy for progressive leadership, whether by moving suitable faculty up the existing administrative chain of command, or by implementing other—more accountable, more democratic—structures of governance altogether.

Katie Hogan’s essay, “**Complicit: on Being a WGSS Program Director in the Neoliberal University,**” offers us the nuanced reflections of a program director who is torn between her urge to stop the exploitation of adjunct colleagues, and her desire to keep a beleaguered, underfunded, and historically marginalized discipline alive. Recognizing the conflicted, partially compromised, and yes, *complicit*, position she occupies in managing a department that runs almost exclusively on adjunct labor, Hogan pushes us to develop a “more multifaceted understanding of complicity,” as well as a mode of political practice that transcends the moralistic and the individualistic to open paths for a broad-based coalition that can empower both precariously deployed faculty members and vulnerable departments alike. “Expounding on privilege, guilt, and complicity is not going to overthrow the system,” she points out. Nor, she implies, will washing one’s hands of complicit positions help to overcome inequalities that are structural in nature.

Hogan reminds us of a painful historical irony. A discipline such as Women and Gender Studies would appear to be doubly well-positioned to play a leading role in the struggle to fight for equity and justice for adjunct and contingent faculty—first because of its longstanding commitment to activist principles and methods, and second, because of the disproportionate feminization of contingent faculty work. Yet the marginalized position of WGSS—in the form of a long-standing “respectability problem,” as well as endemic underfunding—has kept this ostensibly egalitarian discipline from fully realizing its principled promise. The fear of budget cuts or outright “discontinuation,” as well as anxieties about being stigmatized as less than

“respectable,” has pushed some scholar-activists in the field to confine their praxis to places other than the university—even as that university itself is rife with the kind of everyday injustice that WGSS is pledged to dismantle.

Drawing analogies to the contradictory position of minority police officers, as explored by Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow*, and taking lessons from activists in the anti-sweatshop movement, Hogan argues against both the idea that department directors should be expected to play the leading role in the movement that is needed, but also the idea that “boycotting” adjunct labor hiring itself would do much good. Instead, she very usefully concludes her essay with an exemplary checklist of what sympathetic department chairs can and should do in the current climate: “support contingent faculty unionization; pressure state legislators to fund higher education; demand cuts in president, administrator, and athletic coach salaries; and reach out to parents so they can insist that their children be taught by teachers paid a living wage.” While not as “dramatic” or “media-worthy” as outright refusing to hire adjuncts or publicly quitting a “complicit” position, such avenues, sustained over time, and across departments (perhaps with the aid of unionization of the chairs themselves, as recently has occurred at my home institution), hold real potential to empower both precarious faculty and precarious departments alike.

In his **“Letter on Scholactivism: To Graduate Students and Young Colleagues,”** Vincent B. Leitch draws from over forty years of experience as a tenure-track activist. Leitch’s account spans—and contests—the passing of the era of the “welfare state university,” offering lessons drawn from progressive activity in a variety of forms and forums, from the classroom, to the scholarly anthology, from the Modern Language Association, to the American Association of University Professors. As he reminds us, “Today’s activist teachers stand in a long line of educator advocates starting with Socrates.” Yet Leitch’s lessons tend away from the grandiose, focusing on humble, down-to-earth insights. He surveys the emotional costs of sustained activism, offering a list of everyday habits that may help scholar-activists to persevere in the face of long, time-consuming struggles and daunting odds. He emphasizes the importance of the inglorious work of maintaining and sustaining organizations, and underscores the dangers of isolation—“Don’t allow yourself to be singled out,” he advises—as well as of being consumed by fear or anger. He cautions against the temptation to project resentment or arrogance towards colleagues, but also the danger of getting mired in formal bureaucratic obligations to the point of squelching one’s critical voice. He admits a preference for the role of “fringe” dissident, while underscoring the importance of maintaining the organizational ties that allow one’s dissidence to have meaning in the first place.

At the same time, Leitch’s account of advocacy efforts beyond the strictly academic does not imply a denigration of the traditional avenues for scholarly activity. While cautioning against “indoctrination” he upholds the importance of teaching “critical citizenship”—and of a participant-oriented pedagogy—in the classroom, and expresses pride in his enduring efforts to open the literary and theoretical canon. The latter extend not only to his own students, but, through his work on the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, to an entire generation of humanities scholars. His “Letter” expresses a humility that does not overstate the influence that a particular individual can have on the tides of history (or even the sloshing waves of a department or an organization), but also the well-earned satisfaction of a life of sustained activism that has made a difference. Leitch “goes on the record” here in a way that offers

considerable wisdom to a new generation of activist teachers and scholars. Even as relatively few of us may share his privilege of the tenure-track, his level-headed view and his advice for sustaining activism for the long haul remain relevant.

In stark but allied contrast, **Marisol Cortez's** essay, "**Occupy Los Intersticios! Or, In Defense of Carbon-free Unicorns,**" offers us the restless, even nomadic narrative of a cultural studies critic and cultural activist who has long struggled against the traditional terrain of academia, sometimes deliberately, sometimes as a victim of circumstance. Recounting not only her varied activist efforts but also her dissatisfaction with the confines of existing praxis on both sides of the university walls, Cortez presents us with the paradox of academic and activist communities/organizations that need each other and yet all-too-seldom find ways to work together productively. Her essay explores her own struggles—rough edges and all—as a lived example of the tensions between 'academic' and 'activist' work.

Cortez cautions us against the illusion that academia is "unique" for being a place where people take critical, political, and cultural issues seriously, and yet she also testifies to the difficulty of creating the time and space necessary for critical reflection within activist organizations. Too often a sense of urgency (or outright emergency), compounded by a narrowly positivist notion of political "results," makes talk of "theory" or "culture" appear to be a diversion from the pressing "concrete" work at hand. (*Who has time for "theory" when people are dying of X, Y, and Z?!*) Cortez both respects and pushes back against activist impatience, reminding us (via Stuart Hall) of how vitally important theoretical questions of representation are if we are to actually develop effective strategies for solving even the most urgent social emergency. And yet, as we Marxists claim to know, ideas only become a material force in history when they are gripped by masses of people. Here Cortez challenges academic cultural studies: lacking a major expansion of our audience, Michael Bérubé's dismissive metaphor likening the political impact of the field to the "carbon footprint of unicorns" may, alas, continue to prove all too apt.

Cortez's wager is that Bérubé's unicorn can be turned around: that the impossible in-between-ness of the activist-cultural studies scholar, compelled to occupy the *intersections between* existing institutions, might just give rise to modes of community-based praxis that can change the terrain altogether. In a way her prescription for the anemic political impact of cultural studies is not *less* cultural studies but *more, including critical analysis of the terrain itself*. Crucially, Cortez calls not just for more cultural critique in the usual spaces, but for critical work that dwells within the local communities just outside the campus gates.

Similarly insisting on the need to transgress the "traditional" functions of the university, **Tony Van der Meer's** essay "**Fighting to be Different in the Academy**" shifts the terrain of radical teaching, "going to the roots" of his own praxis on both a philosophical and a very personal level. Van der Meer makes a multi-layered argument for recognizing what activist-scholars do—inside and outside the classroom—as both effective pedagogy and community oriented research, adding value to the university's professed mission, in particular at a public and ostensibly "urban" and "student-centered" institution such as UMass Boston (where not only Van der Meer, but this editor and several other contributors to this volume presently teach). Refreshingly, Van der Meer makes his case for the educational value of activist teaching not only by citing scholarship on different modes of knowing, but also by reflecting on the importance of

educators in his own life who went “beyond the call of duty.” He gives a vivid account of three educators—including a principal and a guidance counselor—who made a major impact on his life, not so much by *what* they taught in the classroom, but by *the way* they took him and other students *outside* of the classroom. As Van Der Meer makes clear, especially for youth from working class families and oppressed minority groups, the fact that a teacher expresses a special interest, taking time out of her schedule on a weekend for an educational experience, can be transformative.

The educators who made the big impact in Van der Meer’s account were those who were flexible enough to take advantage of “teachable moments,” who respected their students as young adults, who trusted and were transparent, standing with students even in times of trouble. They were the teachers who sought to unite with what was positive in students’ rough-edged rebellion, who put themselves, their personal time—even their homes or cars—at the service of students in need. The teachers who made the difference were the ones who shared more than just their professional side, expanding their pupils’ off-campus horizons. This difference is one that Van Der Meer now seeks to create in the lives of his own students at UMass Boston by creating community space and relaxed conversations—often over food and off-campus—and by encouraging students to take on community events and social justice campaigns as topics for engagement in his courses. His essay eloquently testifies to the pedagogical value of activist scholarship and radical teaching, over and above its political motives or impacts.

Kim Emery’s essay, “**Rights and Rebellion: The Faculty Role Revisited,**” closes out this section with a case-study drawn from the history of her home institution, the University of Florida. Emery relates and reflects upon the story of Marshall Jones, an activist professor whose support for the student rebellions of the Sixties finally cost him his job. Working from her own original oral history research, Emery teases valuable lessons from Marshall’s inspiring yet sobering story. These lessons include both those that Marshall and his fellow activists drew from their practical organizing experience, as well as subtle but critical lessons that Emery herself discerns concerning the conceptual limits of the notion of academic freedom, a shield that failed to protect Marshall Jones when he needed it most.

Closely examining this notion of academic freedom as it actually exists in the by-laws of universities, or even for advocacy groups like AAUP, Emery makes the case that the actual language concerning scholarly and institutional obligations provides a highly contradictory situation for the scholar-activist, in Marshall’s day as well as ours. Soberingly, but convincingly, Emery makes the argument that it is ultimately impossible for serious scholactivists to fully abide by the 1940 AAUP Statement on Academic Freedom, a fact which lays activist faculty open to university administrators’ manipulation of “conflicting definitions and contradictory demands.” The problem, she argues, lies not only with the way administrators are interpreting (or ignoring) these long-standing principles—the problem goes to the heart of these constructs themselves. Emery pushes us to take the foundational inconsistencies that structure academic work seriously, recognizing the “system of double-binds,” that, to this day, make professorial activism a risky proposition. As she writes: “Changing the status quo requires challenging the institutions that sustain it, including the key terms and distinctions on which their operation relies.”

A few other lessons that Emery draws out deserve mention. Challenging the habits of an academic left that is often big on radical talk and short on attention span, Emery's account of the developing Civil Rights movement in and around UFL underscores the importance of building relationships, on- and off-campus, through sustained, accessible, public actions that mobilize people in ways that long talk sessions will not. Just as crucially, Marshall's story shows how seemingly "moderate" political practice led to more radical learning *over time*—as opposition to particular policies drew participants to see the ways that those policies were embedded in and defended by ruling institutions and their backers. The explicit politics of these early campaigns may appear mild to us today; nonetheless the critical mass of people they drew together consistently on the picket-line put them in opposition with the ruling order. This then created the conditions for the actual development of mass consciousness, through experience—through shared reflections on struggle.

Looking back at the Civil Rights movement—and its trajectory towards Black Power and more openly revolutionary formations such as the Black Panther Party—it is tempting for us today to want to claim the theoretical/political/rhetorical radicalism that the Sixties movements produced as our starting point. After all, it's easy to think that what they learned—what they revealed about the "true nature of the system," etc.—we should not have to re-learn: "*We know these things already, don't we? Shouldn't we be able to start our struggles where theirs left off, picking up the radical lessons as our launching point?*" Perhaps. But to learn from the practical successes—rather than the culminating theoretical conclusions—of the CRM might mean something quite different. If we emphasize—as Emery does in her account of Marshall Jones and crew—the practical *process* that produced those radical insights as a collective phenomenon, not just as isolated intellectual knowledge but as something like a "material force of history," the radical lessons we draw might take a surprising form. We might reconsider once more the crucial role played by "moderate" language and "old-fashioned" tactics as the condition of gathering forces, laying the basis for a radicalization that has roots far beyond the narrow clique of the advanced. Emery's account makes clear the importance of learning over time, and, crucially, of understanding teaching and learning as collective and multifaceted—with lessons often coming from the students, and from summing up mistakes, not just relishing successes. The *summing up together* being the key.

Learning from those who taught us: Tributes

Our special issue concludes with moving tributes to three influential educator-activists. Each honors the life and work of a cherished teacher by reflecting on how their example illuminates the way forward for those of us who continue in their wake. Notably, each of these tributes gives us an example of *grounded* praxis, calling our attention to a life-work that was particularly concerned with the relationship between people and their *environment, understood simultaneously in natural and social, local and global terms*. Whether concerned with the complex ecosystems of socialist Cuba, the symbolic importance of the land in indigenous communities, or the historical sediments of an industrial city such as Pittsburgh, each became a great radical teacher-activist in part by dwelling with the land, the life-systems, histories, and the people who constitute it.

Victor Wallis honors the late Richard Levins (1930-2016) by showing how his work—as a scientist and an activist—exemplified the power and the necessity of dialectical thinking.

Levins' work—and his life—gave the lie to those who would separate Science from Politics, as if the scientist were not a part (and a partisan) of the world s/he was studying. Wallis focuses on Levins' contributions to environmental thought and agricultural practice, contributions that were bound up with his lifelong internationalist commitments to the socialist struggle in Cuba. Underscoring Levins' opposition to technocratic “experts” and his deep respect for the experience and knowledge of people who actually *work* the land, Wallis suggests the way that Levins' activist commitments informed his intellectual approach. His insistence on thinking in dialectical and holistic terms did not emerge from theoretical study alone, but from working alongside farmers on the Cuban soil. Wallis concludes by demonstrating how the dialectical approach Levins practiced remains essential to the socialist project in the United States, particularly with respect to relating the class struggle against capitalism to the particular identity based struggles associated with the “new social movements.”

In their co-authored essay, “**On the Ground with David Demarest: Toward a Methodology of Scholar Activism,**” Joel Woller, Courtney Maloney, and Charles Cunningham offer a moving reflection on their late mentor's critical pedagogy, in particular his “place-based activism.” Drawing from personal experience and research alike, these three former students distill from Demarest's example a clear set of adaptable scholactivist principles. In this way, they not only testify to what made their teacher's work so transformative, but present this understanding in a way that enables readers to adapt elements of Demarest's approach into their own teaching and activism.

Woller, Maloney, and Cunningham emphasize how Demarest (1931-2011) linked what are often thought of as opposed realms: classroom and community, literary study and public participation, local history and global critique, inquiry and advocacy. What emerges is an inspiring portrait of a teacher who was as committed to pushing his middle-class students to explore histories and geographies that had been hidden from them as he was to creating and defending educational spaces for those excluded from academia. Demarest literalized the notion of history “from the bottom up,” developing a “proletarian pedestrian” pedagogy based on the humble form of the off-campus walking tour. Step by step, Demarest cultivated an interdisciplinary approach that enriched both his students' grasp of literature and of the literal landscape around them, including the human labor and class struggle that shaped it. Moreover, through his steadfast involvement in community efforts to defend irreplaceable historical sites—including the literal battleground of the Homestead Strike of 1892—Demarest did not just teach students to *study* the natural and social environment, but to *transform* it as well.

Of special note, Demarest also seems to have transformed *himself*. Beginning as someone who confessed he “didn't like” living in Pittsburgh, he grew to become a passionate activist-expert for his home city and the surrounding region. Granted the privilege of tenure in the 1960s, he worked for decades against the current, putting his academic capital at the service of others who needed it. From his twenty-two years editing an inclusive campus union newsletter, to his anthologizing working class literatures, to scores of critical community events across Western Pennsylvania, Demarest comes through as someone distinguished by his willingness to do the often anonymous, painstaking, “behind the scenes” labor that remains absolutely necessary if we are to have spaces that will allow marginalized voices to be heard. Even when he was working with historical documents, our co-authors point out, Demarest operated collectively and democratically, as a “collaborator with the dead,” aiming not to cull his

own genius insights from the archive, but to “host a conversation” through which new alliances might be forged, old lessons passed on. Woller, Maloney, and Cunningham, encapsulate Demarest’s research ethos: “The living protect the memory of their predecessors and fan the spark of hope ignited in the past, just as the voices of the past inspire, provoke, and perhaps instruct their descendants.” Clearly, these three scholar-activists had a great collaborator in Dave Demarest. Thanks to their essay, their collaborator can now be *ours* too.

Bringing our tribute section, and our special issue, to a close, **Christopher Craig’s** essay, “**John Trudell and the Spirit of Life**” honors the late Native American activist, writer, and musician, John Trudell (1946-2015). Unlike Wallis and the Carnegie Mellon team, Craig never had the chance to meet his activist teacher in person. Nonetheless, he shares an insightful review of Trudell’s life and a moving personal account of his own experiences introducing Trudell’s work to students at a Catholic liberal arts college. Within the context of a course that critically examined “The West,” Trudell provided Craig with ample opportunities to challenge students’ ideas about American history, US society, and the genocide of indigenous peoples. His work further challenged their generally liberal-humanitarian ideas about “how to change the world for the better,” ideas that were encouraged by the “social justice” mission of their institution. As Trudell and Craig both remind us, inherited ideas about what “solutions” look like are often in fact part of the *problem*.

Craig gives us a vivid sense of the student-to-student debate in his classes, a debate that often pit liberal-volunteerist “activists” against “critics” who called out the ideology motivating such activism in the first place. As Craig shows, Trudell’s work both inspired passionate discussion, and pointed the way out of this deadlock. Creatively but forcefully relating the acute struggles of front line indigenous communities back to the more general situation facing so many people today (“the new indians” as Trudell called them), Trudell shows how the genocide of native people is an expression of a system that also seeks to exploit and oppress humanity in general, a system that turns our natural energy against us. What is needed, then, is not activism motivated by *charity* for the suffering “other,” but struggle in *solidarity* alongside these long-oppressed peoples—against institutions and ideologies that alienate, exploit, and oppress the life of our planet. With their long legacy of surviving and resisting this system, perhaps it is indigenous people’s movements—and voices like Trudell’s—that should be seen as offering the “new indians” some desperately needed assistance. The directional dynamic of the charitable-liberal “social justice” volunteer must be *turned around*.

By problematizing the volunteer-liberal-uplift spirit that emerged as his students’ spontaneous response to stories of indigenous oppression—a kind of latter-day missionary practice that would aim to “better equip” indigenous people for “success” within the current system—Craig evokes a tension that runs through higher education more generally. The university, after all, remains an institution deeply invested in notions of “better equipping” students for “success,” even as dominant notions of American “success” are often less a solution than a part of the problem. Student resistance to Trudell thus reflected not just the students’ own limits, or those of Catholic ideology, but the limits of prevailing notions of “social change” perpetuated by liberal educational institutions in general.

Whatever his students’ verdict on Trudell’s more radical proposals, Craig convincingly demonstrates how a sustained engagement with Trudell made students stretch their thinking,

instilling in them a deeper sense of the importance of the earth upon which we all depend, an earth to which we belong—an earth under threat, from both liberal ideology and genocidal land grabs. Closing our volume, Craig’s essay reminds us that student resistance is often the site of genuine learning—and not just for the students. After all, as we scholactivists know, it is only by pushing inherited limits that we discover who we are, where we are...and what we might be capable of. We must “bite the pear” not just to *know* the *pear*, but to discover our own teeth.

Notes

¹ According to Google’s online dictionary.

² For the full set of questions that prompted this volume, see the original Call For Papers, appended to this introduction.

³ For a discussion of the deficits incurred as a result of the lack of a mass left party in the United States, see Jodi Dean’s *Crowd and Party* (Verso, 2016) as well as my essay “How do communists party?” in *Rethinking Marxism*, Vol. 27, No.3 (July 2015).

⁴ For a fuller discussion of the various capitalist crises structuring our current moment, see the 2010 special issue of *Works and Days, Culture and Crisis* available online at <http://clogic.eserver.org/2010/2010.html>

⁵ That article remains an authoritative document on Churchill’s case, providing meticulous and compelling evidence that Churchill was indeed wrongfully targeted and fired from his post, subject to a deliberate and malicious campaign of misrepresentation and repression at various levels of university and state administration. It remains must reading, as does much of Carvalho’s edited *Works and Days* volume, entitled *Academic Freedom and Intellectual Activism in the Post-911 Era. Scholactivism: Reflections on Transforming Praxis* is but the latest contribution to a tradition of critical resistance and intellectual activism that *Works & Days* has represented for decades under the leadership of David Downing. I would like to thank David Downing for his unwavering support and guidance during what has been nearly a three-year project. It has once again been an honor and a pleasure, David. Thanks also to *Works and Days* editorial assistants, Peter Faziani and Matthew Stumpf, and to Carl Grey Martin, Chris Craig, Linda Liu, and Greg Meyerson for offering helpful comments that strengthened this introductory essay.

⁶ Indeed, Zabel himself relies on ideas about the needs of all humanity for socialism, namely when he invokes the pressing specter of ecological catastrophe to set the stage for his socialist version of the Pascalian wager. As he frames it, the Pascalian question would be something like: 'Is it worth betting on the uncertain but potentially great possibility of socialism in the face of the certainty of longterm capitalist-ecological collapse?' Such a question seems easy enough to answer in the affirmative. However wouldn't the less prejudged --less certain, but more accurate--manner of posing the question be something like this: 'Is the uncertain but

potentially great gain of socialism in the future worth focusing one's life work on that goal at the expense all the amazing individual material pleasures that capitalism might offer you before it destroys the planet?' The lure of such pleasures after all, actual and hypothetical, real and delusional, are far from beyond the gaze of much of the working-class. Insofar as it is possible for any individual— proletarianized or otherwise—to be taken in by ruling aspirations, the struggle over ideas and values remains crucial.

⁷ Indeed, Freeman's essay inspired me to use the film in several sections of a course on Popular Culture. The experience discussing it with students helped me to develop the interpretation that I share below.

⁸ "The Petrified and the Proletarian" published in *Red Wedge Magazine* in two parts: <http://www.redwedge.com/online-issue/coates-baldwin-wright?rq=Ramsey> and <http://www.redwedge.com/online-issue/the-petrified-proletarian-two?rq=Ramsey>

APPENDIX

A Call for Papers for a special volume of

Works and Days

&

Cultural Logic: Marxist Theory and Practice

on the question of

SCHOLACTIVISM:

Reflections on Transforming Praxis Inside and Outside the Classroom

Edited by Joseph G. Ramsey

Where do radical scholarship, teaching, and activism connect? Where should they? How do academics at present engage in activism? How ought we to? What are the strengths and weaknesses of prevailing modes of scholar-activist political praxis—from union efforts, to conference assemblies, from summer seminars, to partybuilding efforts, to various on and off-campus coalitions? What do scholars and teachers in particular have to contribute to activist campaigns beyond the classroom? How can the classroom itself be understood as a site of activism? In what ways do the “educators need to be educated” today?

What should effective activism produce? What can we learn, both positively and negatively, from past attempts at transformative intellectual-political praxis? What positive models, past or present, local or distant, can we point to in terms of scholar or teacher activism that have opened new radical possibilities? What pitfalls threaten such academic-activist interventions? In what sense does the intellectual, scholarly, or pedagogical production taking place on or around university, college, or K-12 campuses today become a “material force” in the world in which we live? To what extent does it enable or become an obstacle to genuine movement for radical social change?

What opportunities for transformative praxis are being opened up in the current conjuncture of crisis-racked neoliberal capitalism? Which are being shut down? How is the shifting terrain of the “post-welfare state university” —with its decreasing state support for the humanities and its increasing reliance on super-exploited “adjunct” faculty and high stakes testing—creating new chances and new dangers for radical praxis? Which avenues of activism hold the most promise for us in the present period? Which appear to be foreclosed or blocked? Which appear to be fundamentally exhausted and why? What modes of activism today in fact play a negative role in dissipating, confusing, or ensnaring radical political energies, preventing them from pursuing more productive avenues?

How should we relate to the experiences, the legacies, and the cultural productions of previous eras of activism? To what extent do we see our present scholarly and activist, intellectual and political commitments as extensions of these prior efforts? To what extent do we see our own praxis as representing a rupture from these past moments’ work? What are the positive and what are the negative lessons that can be critically abstracted from these prior moments, and how are they of value for us today? For instance: What are the correct critical

lessons to be derived from the rapid rise and fall of the Occupy Movement in the US? From recent labor movements on and off campus? From other mass mobilizations across the world since the Great Financial Crisis of 2007-2008?

In our writing, our teaching, our conversations, and correspondence: how do we relate to the notion of ‘activism’ in theory and in practice? What is the unconscious political content of the scholarly and pedagogical forms in which we are engaged? What is the message that our activism sends out, and to whom is it addressed?

We welcome: Testimonials, Credos, Manifestos of Academic and/or Activist practices, and Reports from the Field, as well as more traditional essays and scholarly papers. We seek first-hand accounts of attempts to overcome particular obstacles to engaging social struggles and radical political issues in the classroom or in other academic contexts, in all their mix of positive and negative results. We also welcome personal accounts of struggles to overcome the various forms of alienation that characterize academic labor in the humanities today, and that confront academic activists in particular. How have you sought to reconcile your commitments as activist and as scholar and as teacher in the current environment? What insight or advice can you offer others facing similar struggles?

We also welcome: Poetry as well as prose, photography, graphic art, and other creative forms, as well as reviews of recent critical or cultural production (books, films, blogs, etc) that thoughtfully engage any of the above topics.

Please submit all proposals (250-500 words) to: Joseph Ramsey at jgramsey@gmail.com and David Downing at downing@iup.edu. The print edition of the two-part volume will appear in *Works and Days* (www.worksanddays.net) in 2016. An expanded online open-access version will appear in *Cultural Logic: an electronic journal of Marxist theory and practice* (www.clogic.eserver.org).



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