

Life in the Undercommons

Sustaining Justice-Work Post Disillusionment

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OUR SHARED EFFORTS TO ENGAGE IN JUSTICE WORK from within our various positions at the university are entangled in the institution's and the broader education system's complicity in (neo)colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy. We, and many others like us, attempt to dismantle this complicity even though our activities within the institution are disciplined through precarious funding situations, competitive grants processes, the devalorization of collaborative scholarship, and disciplining metrics that alienate us from our labor as educators and students. "In the face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of—this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university" (Moten & Harney, 2004, p. 101). This essay is the product of our stolen time (away from grading, meetings, assistantships, etc.) to collectively better understand the tensions between our motivations for being at the university and our experiences while here. We share our desires for the university to be a free space to think creatively and engage in social change *and* our lived experiences of the university as an institution that rewards and maintains the status quo of the education system.

In this essay, we explore our work in relation to our struggles within the university from our various positions as tenured professor and graduate students. Our collaboration on this project evolved from a seminar on language and culture, a space that facilitated the centering and exploration of our identities. The three of us, who self-identify respectively as of mixed-cultural-heritage (Mary), white (Erin), and Haitian (Chelda), engaged in a series of group discussions to explore these identities, our

commitments to justice, and our positions within the university. These conversations opened up further space to better understand and collectivize our experiences in the institution. We begin by presenting a brief critique of the university. We then focus our personal and shared narratives around a few overlapping themes: legitimizing modes of knowledge production, the separation and dichotomization of the university and “community,” and the tensions involved in moving between and merging scholarship and activism. We conclude by further drawing inspiration from Moten and Harney’s (2004) notion of the undercommons of the university to understand how we can collectively support and enable each other, our colleagues and our students to do justice work in and beyond the academy. Out of our agitation and disillusionment with the university, we discovered the undercommons. It is a place where we can collectively learn to form cracks in the institution that enable the Others to invade the university and a space of tension where we can interrogate the practices of the university. We, and others like us, who seek to affect equitable change within and beyond the institutions that employ and educate us, are members of the undercommons.

In our following narratives, we all imagined the university might be a supportive place to study and do something about education and oppression. However, our experiences of struggling for funding and legitimacy in our projects, disciplining our students through metrics while we are disciplined ourselves, our student debt, and our attempts to resist the individualization of academic work have disillusioned us from the institution as any sort of noble or free place. Resources and support for meaningful classroom experiences, reliable funding and security, and collaborative scholarship are not inherent to the institution. These are things we must struggle to collectively self-organize in order to support and enable each other in our work revitalizing indigenous languages, challenging the devaluation of indigenous, black, brown and migrant knowledges and experiences at the university, organizing university workers through solidarity unionism, among other struggles and movements of which we are a part.

Bousquet (2008) argues that university administrators during the past 40 years, “have steadily diverged from the ideals of faculty governance, collegiality, and professional self-determination” and “have steadily embraced the values and practices of corporate management,” (p. 1). More recently, during the past 20 years, university administrators have drawn on a discourse of ‘crisis’ in order to implement neoliberal policies. The results of these policies have entailed a decrease in financial support for all students, increases in tuition and debt, an increase in workloads, among other things. Precarious adjunct faculty jobs are now the majority of all higher education teaching positions available to graduating PhDs, and curricula and teaching become increasingly routinized and standardized (Bousquet, 2008; Meyerhoff, Johnson, & Braun, 2011). These conditions are discursively justified by the ‘crisis’ while higher level administrative and managerial positions have generally increased in number and in pay (Bousquet, 2008). These changes are the result of administrators’ active transformation of universities’ organizational cultures to “both encourage and command faculty to engage in market behaviors (competition, entrepreneurship, profit-motivated curiosity, etc.),” while squeezing as much work out of “part-time pieceworkers, graduate-student employees, undergraduate tutors, and full-time non-tenurable instructors” for as little compensation as possible (Bousquet, 2008, p. 11).

Moten & Harney (2004) describe the recent transformations of universities to profit-motivated, corporatized institutions as not a new thing but a continuation and intensification of the hegemonic and colonial function that universities have always had – or what they term “the method of *universitas*” (e.g., the academic production of the Oriental Other (Said, 1978) or the academic-scientific production of the racial Other (Watkins, 2001) (p. 114). Similarly, Smith (1999) in her work towards decolonizing research methodologies, historically positions academic knowledge production as the systematic conquest and attempted erasure of indigenous knowledges and histories. The modernist project of education has always been defined against those persons who are colonized and treated as underdeveloped, uncivilized, and uneducated – often de-valuing their ways of life, knowing, and studying as a kind of refuse, seen as wasting the land and bodies on which development and education could be taking place (Katz, 2011). Colonialist, modernist knowledge production has served to perpetuate the legitimization of imperial authority, and its right to evaluate and dictate ‘civilized’ modes of relating and producing (Grande, 2004). These pervasive colonialist ways of representing the world have produced managerial and disciplinary practices that, alongside sheer military force, have created the conditions for colonization and resource extraction. At the same time, education institutions are used to distancing indigenous and colonized peoples from their linguistic, cultural, and situated practices, attempting to assimilate people into becoming compliant wage workers, and, in Carter G. Woodson’s terms, “good colonials” (Rodríguez, 2009, p. 164).

In this way, modern education and colonialism are co-constitutive. Education has been a key technology in creating the material conditions for colonization. And, this exploitation of peoples and lands has been instrumental in developing university institutions in the U.S., Canada and Europe, providing them with research subjects and material resources, such as precious metals that workers in the Global South mine and manufacture into computers, the technological basis of global higher education, while they are excluded from that system. The education system itself has its constitutive exteriors of those persons and spaces that are hidden in the “global shadows” of neo-colonial capitalism (Ferguson, 2006). At the same time, the university, increasingly labeled “global,” is framed as inclusive of everyone and everyplace. Brophy and Tucker-Abramson (2011) argue that the “rollout” of the global, corporate university, particularly in urban areas and in collaboration with the state, take on local development projects and act as “an instrument of dispossession, gentrification, and urban renewal” (p. 11). As is the case with many U.S. universities, “the development and growth promised by such projects often fails to materialize into concrete gains for working class people of color, who instead find themselves disproportionately pushed out of their communities and into an uncertain future” (Bailey & Dougherty, 2011). Because universities have often historically and structurally functioned to lend credibility to colonial and capitalist exploitation, we have to attend to and strategize around the ways in which we can participate in the institution without *becoming* the institution.

In education fields, we are expected to research and then “fix” problems out in schools and communities. Once we are here, we are often told that we have “made it”. However, the ivory tower does not inherently give us a better vantage point from which to see the world and enact change. We still have to contend with the effects of global capitalism in our academic workplaces (they are not somehow “outside”). In our

discussions, we shared different motivations for taking up positions at the university, and how these transformed during our struggles to collaborate in our knowledge production with each other and with the groups of people we work and study with beyond its borders, how we negotiate the dichotomization of the university and “community”, and how we make our work relevant to the broader struggles and movements with which we identify.

Docile diverse subject no more! (Chelda)

In retrospect, I came to this PhD program to, among many other things, unconsciously extend an amenable student identity. In my imaginary, being a student meant I could humbly approach new concepts, follow my curiosities, and be safely guided toward new levels of consciousness. I assumed that my presence meant institutional progress and that ten years from now, people like me (a working class student of color) would critically multiply as a result of intentional institutional change. Historically, this naiveté served me well, as I remained a docile participant in institutional diversity fetishization. Blinded by the myth of exceptionality (the rationale for why I was often the only black student in my classes), I didn’t question the academy’s exclusionary practices. The more I studied critical pedagogy, the clearer it became that the academy does not hold itself accountable for the values of diversity it espouses, and worse yet, there is not a sustained organizing body within the institution that does so either. Disillusioned and frustrated with the unwarranted racial and cultural isolation and lack of culturally relevant pedagogy in the academy, I decided to redirect my energies toward changing the institution.

To begin, I sought out the Black Graduate And Professional Student Association (BGAPSA) at the University. BGAPSA is a scholarship, service, and socially oriented student body designed to represent and address the needs of students of African descent. As the only interdisciplinary, campus-wide student group focused on unifying black graduate students, BGAPSA did not effectively reach the nearly 1,000 members it aimed to serve. Shortly after inquiring about joining the executive board, I learned that the association was an inactive and unregistered group. Alongside a few other black graduate students, I organized to reactivate the organization and reenergize its members. Through organizing efforts, we quickly learned that black graduates students struggled most deeply with the violent remoteness brought on by severe underrepresentation in their respective departments and the culturally irrelevant (and at times overtly offensive) pedagogy and practices of faculty, staff and peers. Members spoke of being discouraged to apply for grants and awards, to pursue higher degrees or even remain in the academy. In response to the shared disenchantment, the board and I organized monthly socials to strengthen community and elicit ideas as to how we can address these issues with a unified voice. Our efforts are still in progress.

The narratives of my black peers reflect my personal experiences at the university. Given my field of study (culture and teaching), I found and created spaces where I could challenge status-quo Eurocentric pedagogy explicitly and subliminally undermining the knowledges of traditionally marginalized people. Through the employment of critical analysis in my classes, I regularly attempt to disrupt white

supremacist discourses that tend to dominate discussions. I evaluate professors on their cultural relevancy, both in rhetoric and practice. I intentionally enact agency in the spaces where I once felt my voice was forbidden. It is my hope that my efforts to disrupt these oppressive discourses in my own department, and in the University more broadly, will result in improved policies and practices that create better academic and social experiences for traditionally underserved students.

My solidarity with students of color at the University is not an ethical, arbitrary or ideological sport, but rather a personal, sometimes even imposed racialized alliance. Therefore, my activism toward social and institutional change positions me at the interstices of personal gain and collective advancement. However, these commitments are not without tensions. For as much as I am devoted to revolutionizing the academy, my priorities as a student are my studies and eventual graduation. The conversations between Mary, Erin and I further uncovered the struggles of being the oppressed while in cahoots with the oppressor.

Breaking out of the cocoon and into the undercommons (Erin)

When I began graduate school in Chicago for my master's in social and cultural foundations in education, I became involved in community struggles for equitable education and against the capitalist, racist, oppressive, and gentrifying forces in the city. I was able to do so through relationships with and generous mentorship by a group of amazing people at a community engagement center (which was often in danger of getting its support yanked by the University). They were trying to subversively leverage resources (like grant writing skills, money, technology, and space) from the institution to support groups, community coalitions, and grassroots projects working against the interconnected projects of gentrification, the threat of an intensified police state brought on by Chicago's bid for the 2016 Olympics, and school privatization -- all of which the University was deeply implicated in. Had I stayed cocooned in my graduate classrooms and in the critical theory we read, I worry that I would have continued to remain ignorant of the fact that my race and class privileges had always provided my invisible, taken-for-granted safety net historically constructed on the backs of others. Through these relationships and experiences in Chicago, I began to get really angry at traditional education and academia. I have never learned within the walls of these education institutions, as I had begun to with these collective projects, the skills and knowledges needed to build a safety net based on mutual aid, self-organization, and based in lived experiences of oppression – skills and knowledges that cannot be found in “high theory” or within the limits of traditional classrooms that are rarely connected to ongoing organizing projects.

When I started this PhD program, I imagined that, I would be able to have more freedom and flexibility to work with and for collective, grassroots and radical projects for social change than with my most recent nine to five daycare job. My imaginary of the PhD program as a free place where I would have time and space to focus my energy on embedding my work and study in collective struggle quickly transformed to feelings of anxiety from pressures to publish, specialize, and professionalize (all this while also being in a precarious work situation as a graduate assistant). Partly because of my

disillusionment with the University, I found myself getting involved in graduate student and university worker organizing.

In the aftermath of an unsuccessful attempt to establish a traditional graduate student union, I began organizing with the education workers committee of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), an explicitly anti-capitalist model of union organizing which values direct, solidarity unionism and organizes by industry instead of by trade. Through the IWW, I co-organize with P12 workers (including bus drivers, teachers, education assistants, youth workers, and others) and university workers (including contingent faculty, clerical workers, graduate students, and others), which enables us to link our experiences across our specific “shops” and levels within the education system. This union model aims for workers and students to gain directly democratic control of their work and study conditions.

Instead of studying some abstract community “out there,” I, and the education workers I co-organize with, turn our justice work efforts back toward our places of work within the education system. We attempt to collectivize and theorize our experiences there in order to build campaigns and create working conditions that can foster social justice education. By troubling the dichotomization of the university (as problem solver) and “community” (as a place of problems), we can critically interrogate the relationship between the university and its complicity in broader capitalist, patriarchal, colonial, and racist systems, webs and processes. This dichotomization often makes it seem as though the university is not implicated in the “community” problems it is often positioned as existing to solve.

The Others have invaded the university -and invited their friends (Mary)

How does knowledge creation include and flow back to the people we are “studying”? There is a wall of ‘us and them’ that is colonizing and exploitative – the response is to make pathways for knowledge production to flow back (and forth). Chelda and Erin are cutting paths for others to come into the University (e.g., the next student of African descent in our department might have find it more inclusive and dignifying), and creating spaces for collective work. So there is a new furrow, and all your efforts are not just directed back to endless hoops of publications, presentations, promotions and pontification. In my work as a professor, I make sure that at least half my time goes right to people, communities, and reservations, struggling to recover their indigenous languages. And so we go back there regularly, we Skype there weekly, and we pull them into the University to both create knowledge (i.e., how do we teach adults oral Ojibwe language in a way that is “Ojibwe”?) while supporting their agenda. I write grants to support that work --I am doing that now and always doing that.

My recent Spring semester course was about learning from this – changing and reorienting the way we do research to put community agendas as the thing we respond to and work back and forth with (Dance, Gutiérrez, & Hermes, 2010). This work is creating a space for knowledge production within the University that does not necessarily “count” like a big name publication or an award. Instead, it interrupts the system of exploiting knowledge from communities, like the White Earth reservation group I work with, and instead responds to their learning needs. This work is not *not* allowed as a part of my

Associate Professor job, it is just not as clearly rewarded by the system. These are the “cracks” (products of the undercommons) that I believe can be creatively bolstered to change the flow of constant knowledge production by and for our own exclusive group in the academy. I do write for and with my peers, but I spend nearly equal time thinking through, and responding to, the problem of indigenous language revitalization with the White Earth reservation community.

So knowledge production for whom? If we say the “community” or the “academy” in this case, it quickly breaks down. Through a non-profit, I employ two recently graduated “community” (Native American language community) members to work with me on a project at the White Earth reservation to revitalize the Ojibwe language there. I use my university time, as this is “research”, and yet I am also part of the bigger Ojibwe language community. My closest colleague (happens to be white) in my department acts as an advisor and sounding board, and makes some of the trips with us. I am talking with folks in the Dean’s office about how to write a grant to support the work. The White Earth day care group I work with constantly informs my developing pedagogical theory of what it takes for adults to learn Ojibwe in an informal setting. Certainly, this is knowledge production that comes from and goes right back to meet a “community” need. However, “the community” in this case does not seem all that clearly distinct from the academy, and certainly not at odds with it. Can we imagine a different kind of academy? One that is not in tension with community (the “community” folks are trying to get into our “Ivory Tower”)? The University is a state funded resource for many different communities, and exists to serve these communities. It is a common resource and at the same time a structure that constrains community - where is our agency in this? The language of exclusion and the dichotomization between “community” and “university” inhibits my imagination, and it has an effect on the internalization of hegemony: my internal authoritative voice that creates a hierarchy of communities with the University at the top. Therein lies another reason not to always write or speak in academic jargon, or even exclusively, in theory-laden vernacular. Jargon is a discursive practice, which reinscribes academic discourse and can alienate other discourse communities.

After seventeen years of being some sort of professor, I write this. This did not happen because I “made it” as a professor, but because I continue to surround myself and be engaged with people who were not grounded exclusively in academic work. There were certainly points when I felt so isolated from anything to do with the Ojibwe community that I thought I had to quit the whole thing - and likewise points when I was immersed in community activism, and politics, and longed for the intellectual refuge of theory (Hermes, 2004). I have gone back and forth, but haven’t given up the economic security of the University job, only negotiated with it. When I started at University of Minnesota-Duluth, ten years ago, I negotiated with the Dean that I would live near the reservation (90 miles south of the University) and work with the Lac Courte Oreilles OJibwe community. I asked that this be counted as my service work. In theory, this worked, but in practice some colleagues felt I was not a good departmental citizen (I wasn’t) and this came up in a review for tenure. I was too far away (not seen) and my work too much on the margins (starting an Ojibwe immersion school) to be understood. I risked getting tenure for sure. I hunkered down and published more, which was not understood or appreciated by the fledgling school where I worked, but it did satisfy the

tenure review process. I was held accountable by two very different sets of rules and groups of people with very different goals, and at times I know I seemed to be letting both of them down. Looking back however, it was worth it. The school is very successful (without me) and my work in revitalization and academic communities has more moments of coming together than it ever has. The stress and tension is small in comparison to many jobs. And in the end, I have to remember what a privileged job this is and the responsibilities that come with it.

Undercommons Instead - Everyday Activism, Everyday Transgression

During our sessions, time was carved out for each of us to locate ourselves as activists, but we also troubled this term and its association with a hero archetype. The oppressive refinery tactics of the academy (labor exploitation, isolation, coerced assimilation, etc.,) can dislocate even the most grounded of us if we are not careful to continuously evaluate and resist their effects on our activities. One such tactic mobilized by the hierarchy of the university, especially in education departments, is the archetype of white, Lady Bountiful – the missionary teacher figure endeavoring to civilize, fix and save marginalized peoples in light of her imposed and assumed purity, omniscience, and superiority (Harper & Cavanagh, 1994; Meiners, 2002; 2007). Our justice work in communities is often fetishized in the university, positioning us as heroes and saviors. It can be commoditized into jobs, tenure, and advancement within the university without us ever having to do anything to seriously challenge the status quo or destabilize our privileged positions as academics.

We are privileged, but we are also refugees in the academy because these spaces were not designed for indigenous, black, or white women (Moten & Harney, 2004; Bousquet, 2008). Moten and Harney (2004) describe the undercommons as a maroon community and “an unsafe neighborhood” for the university (p. 103). In the undercommons of the university, we subvert the incorporation of our collective potential into metrics, into bureaucratic time-sucks, into curriculum vitae boosters:

In that Undercommons of the university one can see that it is not a matter of teaching versus research or even the beyond of teaching versus the individualization of research. To enter this space is to inhabit the ruptural and enraptured disclosure of the commons that fugitive enlightenment enacts, the criminal, matricidal, queer, in the cistern, on the stroll of the stolen life, the life stolen by enlightenment and stolen back, where the commons give refuge, where the refuge gives commons (Moten & Harney, 2004, p. 103).

By better understanding how we negotiate the ways in which our desires for the university as a place where we can freely engage each other in radical efforts for change within and beyond it scrape up against our experiences within its institutional borders, we can broaden and strengthen these undercommons. We can carve out cracks in the institution, and make space and time for challenging its coercive forces and our own complicities with it.

We move in these spaces with critical enthusiasm about the work ahead. We come with incredible hope able to meet the challenges of our communities within and beyond the University. There is an expectation that obtaining credentials translates to gaining strength and support to do our work. We open up these spaces in the institution to challenge what is not working for friends, our colleagues, families, communities, and us. We are comforted by the stealthy radicalism of the undercommons. Here, we come ready to learn what hasn't been taught and change what we do not appreciate. When we come... we leave the door open behind us, because we know, the undercommons is inclusive of the people, the folk, and the communities that the university would rather remain silent.

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