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Research, Action, Activism: Critical Solidarities & Multi-Scalar Powers

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Abstract: In this essay, I draw upon my work with the Urban Research Based Action Network (URBAN) to argue for several key principles in research for social justice: reflexivity, especially regarding our work in fraught academic institutions, and engaging multiple ways of knowing. These principles are essential to forming critical solidarities across constituencies, to recognizing and addressing issues of power at multiple scales—local, national, global, and to imagining ourselves as protagonists in our collective futures.
Keywords: social justice; research; epistemologies; reflexivity; critical solidarities; multi-scalar powers

Investigación, acción, activismo: Solidaridad crítica y poderes multi-escalares
Resumen: En este ensayo, recurro a mi trabajo con URBAN (Urban Research Based Action Network) para defender varios principios clave en la investigación de la justicia social: reflexividad, especialmente en relación con nuestro trabajo en instituciones académicas comprometidas y el compromiso de múltiples formas de conocer. Estos principios son

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esenciales para la formación de solidaridades críticas entre los distritos electorales, para reconocer y abordar cuestiones de poder en múltiples escalas - local, nacional, global, y para imaginarnos como protagonistas en nuestros futuros colectivos.
Palabras-clave: justicia social; la investigación; epistemologías; reflexividad; solidaridad crítica; poderes multi-escalares

Pesquisa, ação, ativismo: Solidariedades críticas e poderes multi-escalares
Resumo: Neste ensaio, recorro ao meu trabalho com a URBAN (Urban Research Based Action Network) para defender vários princípios-chave em pesquisa para a justiça social: reflexividade, especialmente em relação ao nosso trabalho em instituições acadêmicas engajadas e engajamento de múltiplas formas de conhecer . Esses princípios são essenciais para a formação de solidariedades críticas entre os distritos eleitorais, para reconhecer e abordar questões de poder em múltiplas escalas - local, nacional, global, e para nos imaginarmos como protagonistas em nossos futuros coletivos.
Palavras-chave: justiça social; pesquisa; epistemologias; reflexividade; solidariedades críticas; poderes multi-escalares

Research, Action, and Activism

This essay originated as a set of remarks made at the Urban Research Based Action Network's national conference in 2016, convening scholars, activists, and artists to reflect upon collaborative approaches to research for social justice. How do we build enough trust to work together productively? In our research for action, how do we not only effectively grapple with current injustices, but also articulate radical futurities to work towards?

Over the past year, we've listened to calls for critical research that helps workers, immigrants, students, and others to revamp campaigns that have traditionally targeted governmental policies— but must now tackle complex webs of decentralized private-public partnerships. For example, I've listened to activists wonder how to organize undocumented workers here in New York, while trying to connect with workers in the Philippines to demand better working conditions from multinationals, and asking the URBAN Research Network to help them rethink how government should be framed. From these conversations, we came to the conference theme of building *critical solidarities*, constantly negotiated, and speaking truth to *multi-scalar powers* at local, national, and global levels, and in multiple policy arenas at once.

Inspired by abolition geographies, radical inter-disciplinarities, unusual methodological pairings, and on-the-ground concerns, we hope to engage critical refusals of neoliberal disempowerment and surveillance as the new normal.

We recognize that we do this from within a fraught institution, on fraught land. The Lenape are the first known people who lived in what is now Manhattan, and some say that Broadway was the longest Native American trail in the US… This gives another twist to our laments on the loss of Broadway as the "Great White Way," *yikes*, even as grievances about the Disney-fication of our public spaces remain valid. Literally, we stand in what used to be an emblem of commerce, the former flagship B. Altman Department Store from 1906 to 1989.

And then, there's the academy. CUNY, for instance, works with over 540,000 students a year. More than three-quarters are students of color. 40% are the first in their families to attend college, come from households with incomes below $20,000, or both. Public institutions like CUNY, the University of Wisconsin, the University of California system, and the University of Massachusetts play special roles in American democracy, ostensibly operating with motives *other*

than power and profit. But we're under attack through corporatization and a profound, anti-intellectual disbelief in—or refusal of—our students' ability to think critically.

This divestment from and privatization of our public institutions only intensifies the academy's history of colonizing knowledge, of commodifying it, of attempting to reduce knowledge to a routinized and codified product. We know the academy tends to legitimize certain forms of knowledge. Many of the recent social science guidelines on this are pretty anti-democratic, implemented without due discussion, and they especially affect those of us who do policy-oriented work that values *local* knowledge, protest, and infra-, below-the-radar politics alongside technical knowledge.

Even as our socially engaged work is devalued, universities use it to advertise their community relations, to burnish reputations. So we fight to not only be taken seriously, but to simultaneously resist co-optation, to keep administrations accountable as best we can, demanding that if they're going to use us for a splash of color on their subway ads, they better walk their talk and provide resources. We try to work *in* but not *of* the systems we navigate, as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten write (2013). We keep contesting the main frames used in popular debates, calling out stereotypes, drawing upon evidence, amplifying the perspectives of those who are most affected. And we keep contesting the criteria by which we're judged, so that dominant discourses don't become hegemonic. We carve out enclaves of resistance in which different ways of knowing constitute *resources*, not oppositional stances.

We could also consider Nancy Fraser's calls to challenge the false binaries of the politics of recognition, of identity, versus those of redistribution (1998). As Michelle Fine has written, economic disadvantage and cultural oppression travel together, in circuits of dispossession (Weis & Fine, 1993, 2012). After all, what demarcates a "typical," "mere" cook from a "true" chef, a teacher from a professor, a secretary from an administrator, a bookkeeper from an accountant, except pervasive devaluation of tasks coded as "feminine" by gender or sexuality, or to be performed by people of color, with material, financial consequences and persistent harm to bodily integrity, dignity, and control.

True circuits of solidarities demand work in which cultural recognition, economic equality, and meaningful representation operate not in lockstep but in tandem, in a dance. For them to be meaningful, to not devolve to lowest common denominators, our solidarities have to be multiple in number, specific to contexts.

I'm inspired here by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's articulation of reparative critique (Sedgwick, 2003). By contrasting reparative critique with "paranoid" fixations on "exposing and problematizing hidden violences in the genealogy of the modern" citizen, Sedgwick doesn't imply that the violence isn't real, or that the work isn't important. She writes, "There's plenty of hidden violence… [but] also… an ethos where [hypervisible] violence [is] offered as… exemplary spectacle."

With this passage, I remember Freddie Gray, killed by Baltimore police officers during a euphemistically named "rough ride." This is hypervisible, fast violence. When Gray passed, he'd been trying to address what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence," gradual and often invisible killings (2011). In his 2008 lawsuit against his absentee landlord, Gray testified, "The windows, [lead] paint was peeling off the windows." Scientists state that blood lead levels of 5 micrograms per deciliter cripple cognitive development, decrease IQ, impair memory. In June 1991, when Gray was 22 months old, his blood carried 37 micrograms (McCoy, 2015). Right now, there are an estimated 10,000 children exposed to lead paint in Baltimore (Woods, 2016).

In *Touching Feeling*, her last book before she died of breast cancer, Sedgwick avows that reparative critiques can be just as sharp as paranoid ones. She writes, "I'm a lot less worried about being pathologized by my therapist than about my vanishing mental health coverage—and that's

given the… luck of having health insurance at all." Alongside deconstruction, she encourages scholars to engage in other ways of knowing as well, less oriented around suspicion, more oriented around dynamic, historically contingent ways of documenting and theorizing the issues that drive our work, to be open to hope, to mistakes—that are "sexy, creative, cognitively powerful" (2003, p. 141).

This is a gathering where we should be encouraged to make mistakes, to surprise, to refuse easy answers and instead ask better questions. As such, we academics in the room should definitely *not* be designated as the experts.

Because we are a beautiful group, with activists, artists, and scholars from different disciplines, it might also help to be mindful of our different vocabularies—academic jargon, nonprofit acronyms, art and design terms. Each of us brings different bodies of knowledge, or knowledges. Which brings to mind some lyrics by Kendrick Lamar (2011):

> I know some rappers using big words to make their similes curve
> My *simplest* shit be more pivotal//
> So won't you bear witness while I bare feet
> So you can walk in my shoes and get to know me

Lamar's words here are wise, even if I probably spend half of my waking life trying to find the right simile or metaphor.

We may not suddenly stop using all vocabulary words from our work, *but* we've all engaged in acts of simultaneous translation, from English to Spanish, from legalese to English, from the written to the visual. These translations are gifts to connect us.

Let's listen to recognize each other, but also listen to the silences, bear in mind those who *aren't* here—youth, for instance, the incarcerated, those who couldn't take time away from their jobs. Let us also be mindful of typically invisible axes of inclusion and exclusion—mental illness, sexual violence, disability. When the Centers for Disease Control report that one of every 5 American women is raped in their lifetime, it is not up to these women to serve as our teachable moments (Smith et al., 2018).

We individuals live through these experiences, but our collective problems concern policies, institutions. This demands us to constantly keep multiple units of analysis in mind, to always trouble systems of oppression, bring attention to intersectionalities, so that we don't homogenize groups of people, tokenize representatives in the room, essentialize identities, or conflate the individual with the systemic, with the political.

Keeping multiple scales in mind prompts some pretty hardcore contradictions. Can we cry with joy at our gay weddings, for example, *and* refuse romanticized, bourgey notions of gay marriage as the ultimate LGBTQ rights campaign, *and* protest marital status as a qualifier for child welfare benefits, hospital visits, survival? When we protest police brutality, we're not talking so much about individual officers but the police state and the prison industrial complex. When we battle gentrification, we aren't just talking about gentrifiers, but speculative real estate developments made easy, and profit-driven corporate-state policies that made displacement inevitable. As we continue our local, national, and global work, let us hold onto contradictions, rather than sweeping them under our rugs.

I'm looking forward to our work together. Classes, deadlines, meetings, protests, family emergencies, and so much else—We know it's difficult for you to take time out to *share, strategize, and reflect* here. We don't take this for granted.

There's no best way to articulate themes, but we organized panels according to policy areas to keep our conversations grounded. We're excited to have small group discussions, while building

community across nodes. We're here for a short time, with a packed agenda, so we didn't envision the panels as lectures but as *starting* points, sparkplugs for something more, something lasting.

Here we are. The poet Claudia Rankine writes, "one meaning of here is, 'In... the presence of' …It also means to hand something to somebody—Here you are…. Here both recognizes and demands recognition…. A hand must extend and a hand must receive" (2004, p. 131).

I'm thrilled that we are here, that I am here, in your presence. Welcome.

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What remains with me after this gathering? Scholars, students, activists, and artists grounded conversations in concrete work, and this lent urgency to questions of knowledge production: When do stories constitute data, and when is "data" used to marginalize counter-narratives? Under what conditions does data inform wisdom?

The first panel began with a skit, with roles played by both activists and researchers. A community organizer played a young boy who simply would not, or perhaps could not, sit still. His teacher, increasingly frustrated, asked a police officer to remove him from the classroom. This powerful, affectively disconcerting piece—some participants were in tears, and the conference had barely started—did more than draw upon and legitimize lived experience as knowledge. It also highlighted contours of the school-to-prison pipeline, jolting us to remember why we were there.

Together, our disparate ways of knowing and positionalities catalyzed into something askance, so that many of us viewed our work with a somewhat unfamiliar, refracted lens. Other speakers cited statistics on the racial disparities in our public schools, in residential patterns, and in deportation rates. But speakers also troubled seemingly straightforward statistical, "big data" sets, by questioning their ownership, their capture, and their public legibility. One artist, drawing upon Afrofuturism studies and along the lines of Octavia Butler or Ursula K. Le Guin's speculative fiction, compelled us—especially people of color—to imagine ourselves as protagonists in our collective futures, and to articulate the world we are working towards, not just what we are working against. Some of us were stumped. "I always talk about the prison industrial complex; I can't imagine what comes after," I heard.

I am as grateful for what did not go according to plan as what did. A few hours into the conference, one of the few youth present, a Somali refugee teenager living in Maine, politely interrupted proceedings to tell us that she felt compelled to write and recite a poem based on what she had heard that morning. I also learned that in such intentional spaces, we can make room for generative conflicts, for constructive contestations—to acknowledge our differences as resources, rather than weaknesses, and to remain as mindful of consensus as masked domination as we might be of disagreements. Some of the panelists, for instance, commented that as they listened to others speak, they had changed their minds a bit. That this occurred without rancor speaks volumes about the generosity of spirit each participant brought to the gathering.

What remains with me is a mode of research imbued with vulnerability, pain, joy, and resistance, and a sense of belonging in a community committed to healing justice.

About the Special Issue

This article is part of a special issue of *EPAA*, *Collaborative Research for Justice and Multi-Issue Movement Building: Challenging Discriminatory Policing, School Closures, and Youth Unemployment* that was edited by Ronald David Glass and Mark R. Warren and curated by the Urban Research Based Action Network (URBAN). This special issue reflects the network's commitment to producing and utilizing research for justice that combines rigorous scholarship with the arts to engage both the head and heart so as to deepen and express our social justice values in our scholarship. In

addition to the cases highlighted in the title of the special issue, there are also essays that interrogate the limits and possibilities of universities for supporting collaborative research for justice, that explore the role that URBAN has played in fostering the formation of both an academic field as well as experiments in fusing knowledge production with knowledge mobilization and community organizing to build movements for justice, and that argue for multi-modal forms of knowing to build the critical solidarities needed to speak truth to multi-scalar powers at local, national, and global levels. These provocative essays are integrated with graphics that explore themes of how collaborative research for justice is related to advocacy and research rigor, how it must navigate institutional barriers and create institutional supports, and how it can play a powerful role in policy development and change. One graphic on the ethics of collaborative community-based research is also integrated with a video commentary. Additional videos feature scholars and activists sharing key lessons about turning points in their careers, accounts of how they put their research to work for justice, and advice they have for the next generation. Another video features scholar-activists reflecting on their experiences as publicly engaged scholars. Taken together, this special issue provides robust guidance for putting truth seeking to work on behalf of and in partnership with the least advantaged communities.

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