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Resourcing Scholar-Activism: Collaboration, Transformation, and the Production of Knowledge

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Resourcing Scholar-Activism: Collaboration, Transformation, and the Production of Knowledge*

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In this article we offer a set of resources for scholar-activists to reflect on and guide their practice. We begin by suggesting that research questions should be triangulated to consider not only their scholarly merit but the intellectual and political projects the findings will advance and the research questions of interest to community and social movement collaborators. **Key Words: community, resourcefulness, scholar-activism.**

本文为学术行动主义者提供一组资源, 以反映并指引他们的实践。我们首先将提出下列建议: 研究问题不只应考量其学术绩效, 而应同时考量研究发现能够促进的知识及政治计画, 以及对社群及社会运动协力者而言的研究问题旨趣, 并同时涵纳上述三大考量。**关键词: 社群, 资源丰沛, 学术行动主义。**

En este artículo ponemos a disposición de estudiosos activistas un conjunto de recursos que versan sobre su práctica y la guían. Para empezar, sugerimos que las preguntas de investigación sean trianguladas para tomar en consideración no solo su mérito académico sino los proyectos intelectuales y políticos que se impulsarán por los hallazgos de la investigación, y las preguntas de investigación que sean de interés para la comunidad y para los movimientos sociales que colaboran. **Palabras clave: comunidad, carácter recursivo, activismo erudito.**

The purpose of this article is to provide a set of resources for scholar-activists to (ref)use as they see fit. We do this by first elaborating on the notion of resourcefulness and the ethical practice of *resourcing* the various insurgencies with which we collaborate as scholar-activists. Grounded in the ethos of resourcing activism, we then offer an approach to scholar-activist research design that we refer to as triangulating the research question that lays out our approach to the coproduction of knowledge with and for our community-based collaborators. We then draw from existing literature on the role of emotion in scholar-activism to engage with the question of what motivates a scholar to pursue this particular form of academic inquiry and how one might choose his or her research projects and partners. Our objective is to offer a set of conjectures or propositions for how one might go about doing scholar-activism based on our own experiences and reflections on those experiences. Although we have nearly two decades of experience in various locations around the globe in this kind of research, we use our most recent work in the Govan neighborhood of Glasgow to ground our propositions and reflections on the practice of doing scholar-activism.

First and foremost, we want to suggest a politics of resourcefulness as a guiding framework for engaging in the process of doing scholar-activism.[1] We see three ways that the notion of resourcefulness might inform scholar-activism. First, scholar-activists can commit to channeling the resources and privileges afforded academics (e.g., time; access to research, technology, and space; grant writing experience; expertise legible to new organizations) to advancing the work of nonacademic collaborators (community groups, activist networks, local insurgencies, etc.). Second, resourcing can take the form of research designed explicitly to ask and answer questions that nonacademic collaborators want to know, following on from Appadurai's (2006) notion that the right to research is a precondition of active citizenship. Finally, a politics of resourcefulness suggests the need for research that explores barriers to sustained and active participation and activism. For example, we need to understand the challenges that nonacademic collaborators face in affecting the change they want to see and how social relations might be transformed in ways that create the conditions for success. Crucially, any attempt to ask and answer these questions must contend with the larger question of how to lay the foundations and nurture conditions to transform grassroots experiences into useful knowledge beyond both the particular places of political practice and the usefulness of that knowledge to

What are the current theoretical debates or
intellectual questions?

What publics and institutional projects are served by
knowing?

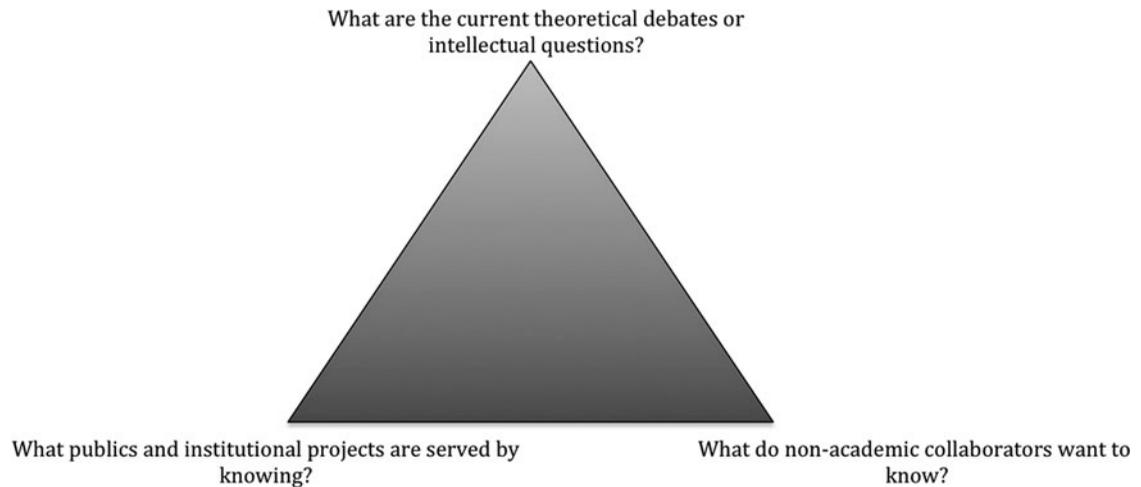What do non-academic collaborators want to
know?

Figure 1 *Triangulating the research question as a scholar activist.*

academic theory production. Here we find much of use in popular education approaches to organizing and engaging with communities, whereby assets can be transformed into usable resources and knowledges for self-determination of communities (as well as academia). A politics of resourcefulness, then, can be understood as something of an interim politics—fiercely aligned with the subaltern, attentive to the intersection of power and knowledge—and Appadurai's claim about the essential nature of research for the marginalized to fully participate, access to research, and the capacity to conduct research is essential. It is an interim politics in the sense that it is not committed to an immutable vision for the future, but rather to the full and complete participation of all groups in engendering visions for the future.

To enact a politics of resourcefulness with respect to research design, we propose an approach to developing research questions and agendas we call triangulating the research question (see Figure 1). This concept, for us, is not about how valid knowledge is or should be produced but, rather, how university-based scholars (i.e., those who must meet the demands and standards of academic knowledge production) might go about devising research questions with a strong ethical and political commitment to engaged research and scholaractivism. This approach takes seriously the scholar part of the scholar-activist title, and to that end we have placed questions of theoretical and intellectual value at the top of the triangle. There is no question that theoretical pursuits can quickly descend into navel gazing, but we are drawn to critical social and political theory precisely because of the ways in which it allows for conceptual space to challenge the increasingly narrow realm of possible futures. It seems to us, then, that the role of the scholar-activist is to pursue and engage with theoretical and conceptual questions in ways that are always insistently and dialectically rooted in the struggles of everyday life. The second point in the triangle, then, is the question regarding which publics, institu-

tions, and political projects are served by knowing the answers the research sets out to address. There are very clear instances when asking this question might have produced different research, such as the case of the Havasupai Nation and the Arizona State researchers,[2] but in most cases the conflict between the publics and institutions served by knowing might be less straightforward. Research on poverty might illustrate these tensions well. For example, there is a substantive and political difference, we argue, in conducting research on how poor families make financial decisions to enable businesses to develop insurance products marketed to the poor and conducting research on the conditions that render poor families more vulnerable in natural disasters to inform public policy designed to address those conditions.

For the third point on the triangle, we want to suggest that research questions should engage with the questions that our community-based collaborators—those whom we do research with, for, and on—want answered. This is not to suggest that scholar-activists become consultants of sorts (see Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010) but, rather, that we seek a balance between the kinds of data and approaches to research that our collaborators desire to advance their projects and the theoretical and epistemological objectives that the academic literature push us toward. Moreover, we want to suggest that this kind of dialectical engagement holds promise to push the theoretical literature toward the kinds of questions that emerge from everyday struggles.

Having proposed a broad ethos (a politics of resourcefulness) for conducting scholar-activist research and a specific approach to design scholar-activist research projects, we want to turn to what we see as the crucial question of how one might decide to become a scholar-activist or enact a scholar-activist approach to research. Since the mid-1990s there has been a resurgence of interest in questions of political relevance, with geographers lamenting the separation

between critical sectors of the discipline and activism going on both inside and outside the academy (see, e.g., Blomley 1994; Castree 1999; Wills 2002; Staeheli and Mitchell 2005) and calling for critical geographers to become politically engaged outside the academy to interpret and effect social change (e.g., Chouinard 1994; Kobayashi 1994; Routledge 1996).

Hence, there have been powerful critiques of research methodology and the voices or ideas silenced by it, emphasizing politically committed research (Nast 1994), increased recognition and negotiation of the differential power relations within the research process (Farrow, Moss, and Shaw 1995) and multiple activist–academic positionalities (Merrifield 1995; Routledge 1996), a growing focus on for whom research is produced and whose needs it meets (Nast 1994; Farrow, Moss, and Shaw 1995), interest in understanding the context-dependent and power-laden intersubjectivity between scholar-activists and the researched (Katz 1992; McDowell 1992; Staeheli and Lawson 1994; Slater 1997; Kitchin 1999; Laurie et al. 1999; Maxey 1999; Moss 2002; Routledge 2002; Fuller and Kitchin 2004; Chatterton 2006; Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010; Chatterton and Pickerill 2010), and increasing significance of public or participatory approaches (e.g., Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2007; "Practicing public scholarship . . ." 2008).

When deciding to engage in scholar-activism, it is important not to be immobilized at the outset by being overly analytical, overly reflexive, or overly cautious. What we mean by this is that we think it important, given the ongoing economic, political, and ecological crises confronting humanity, for aspiring scholar-activists to enter the logics of an insurrectionary imagination. We need to let our core values (e.g., concerning dignity, self-determination, justice) and feelings directly inform our research. This is informed by both personal political values and the need to engage with our emotional responses to the world around us.

This is because scholar-activist engagement emerges from our deep emotional responses to the world. Our personal feelings occur in relational encounters with human and nonhuman others (see, e.g., Bondi 2005). They mediate social and political processes through which people's subjectivities are reproduced and performed (Kwan 2007). Politically, emotions are intimately bound up with power relations and also with relations of affinity and are a means of initiating action. People become politically active because they feel something profoundly—such as injustice or ecological destruction. This emotion triggers changes in people that motivate them to engage in politics. It is people's ability to transform their feelings about the world into actions that inspire them to participate in political action (Chatterton, Fuller, and Routledge 2008; Routledge 2012). As feminist geographers and others have argued, collaborative association with (activist) others necessitates interaction with others, through the doing of particular actions and the experiencing of personal and collective emotions, through creativity and imagination, and

through embodied, relational practices that produce political effects (Anderson and Smith 2001; Pulido 2003; Bennett 2004; Thien 2005; Bosco 2007).

Hence, emotions are both reactive (directed toward outsiders and external events) and reciprocal (concerning people's feelings toward each other). Shared emotions generated between collaborators can create shared collective identities and be mobilized strategically (e.g., to generate motivation, commitment, and sustained participation). Shared emotional templates can be created to find common cause and to generate common narratives and solidarities (Jasper 1998; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; Mansbridge and Morris 2001; Taylor and Rupp 2002; Ettlinger 2004; Ettlinger and Bosco 2004; Bosco 2006, 2007; Juris 2008; Askins 2009).

In particular, and as a response to recent academic concerns with hope (see, e.g., Harvey 2000), we wish to mention the importance of anger as a motivating emotion (Henderson 2008) because disruptive emotions such as anger embody political risks that are frequently emotionally engineered by authorities, whether in university settings or within overly political contexts such as demonstrations. Because the "social regulation of anger . . . generates . . . control scripts in individuals" (Gibbs 2001), we need to craft and direct our anger in ways that are effective for our research and empower progressive political practices (Henderson 2008; Butler 2010). For example, we understand the notion of anger as a motivating force as potential response to postpolitical techniques of governance (see, e.g., Swyngedouw 2010). Of course, in the process of crafting anger, we need to acknowledge people's fears (e.g., concerning employment precarity, masculine norms of confrontation, etc.) and the potential risks involved in rendering oneself vulnerable through anger.

For purposes of illustrating and providing examples of the processes we have developed and the challenges we have encountered, we focus in this article specifically on our mutual work in the South Glasgow neighborhood of Govan. Govan is a former shipbuilding community on the south bank of the River Clyde that experienced a rapid and painful economic decline when the shipbuilding industry collapsed. Today Govan is characterized by high levels of unemployment, poverty, and poor health and ranks within the top 5 percent of most deprived areas according to the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. Of course, the level of deprivation only tells one piece of the story of Govan. Through our work there, we have found remarkable levels of resilience, perseverance, generosity, intelligence, and creativity. Our approach to scholar-activism and engagement attempts to acknowledge those two truths simultaneously—that Govan is at once a place of deep economic deprivation with abiding challenges and a place that is rich in culture, history, knowledge, and value from which we can learn. We see the notion of resourcefulness and triangulating the research question as being productive responses to these two truths in that they seek to acknowledge the uneven distribution of resources

and research capacity that neighborhoods like Govan face (and hence the need for the act of resourcing), while also recognizing the valuable and unique knowledges that exist in these places with which we might coproduce knowledge and learn (as represented in the approach to triangulating research questions we propose). In the following section, we reflect on a series of issues, challenges, and opportunities that arose as we each undertook complementary but distinct engagement processes in this neighborhood. We want to be clear that the set of propositions we laid out earlier (triangulating, resourcing, and the role of emotions in motivating scholar-activist engagement) emerged from these and other scholar-activist experiences we have pursued and, as such, do not represent the seamless and linear implementation of these proposed approaches. Instead, quite the opposite is true: The experiences we recount here represent messy and imperfect scholar-activist engagement based on principles, research programs, emotional responses, and political commitments that, at the time, were not neatly organized or easily articulated. It is only on mutual reflection on these and other processes that we arrived at the approaches we offered earlier.

Triangulating, Resourcing, and Doing Scholar-Activism: Reflections from the Field

We have each spent considerable time working in and with communities in Govan as part of our ongoing commitment to engaged scholarship and scholar-activism. Derickson has primarily collaborated with the organization Community Roots and the Govan Connections[3] project to inquire into notions of resilience and resourcefulness and Routledge has worked in collaboration with activists in the environmental justice network So We Stand (http://sowestand.com)[4] to conduct popular education and social theater workshops with various activist constituencies. Based on these experiences and as a way to illustrate how triangulation, resourcefulness, and emotion might work in such contexts, we offer the follow set of reflections.

We want to begin by addressing the decision to engage with communities and in a sense become a scholar-activist. We believe that it is important not to be immobilized at the outset by being overly analytical, overly reflexive, or overly cautious. Although feminists and other critical human geographers and social scientists were right in challenging scholars to consider questions of power and reflexivity in the production of knowledge, we want to suggest that the ongoing economic, political, and ecological crises confronting humanity urgently necessitate engagement. We need to let our core values (e.g., concerning dignity, self-determination, and justice) and feelings directly inform our research. Thus, we cannot allow reflexivity to become paralyzing and need to engage our deep emotional responses to the world around us to compel us to become engaged scholars.

For us, Routledge's collaboration with So We Stand was motivated by concerns about issues of climate justice (see Chatterton, Featherstone, and Routledge 2013) and economic deprivation in one of Glasgow's poorest neighborhoods. Derickson's engagement with Community Roots and Govan Connections was motivated by an abiding concern with resourcing (see MacKinnon and Derickson 2013) the capacities of actually existing urban struggles that are born out of the lived experience of the place, particularly in poor and marginalized postindustrial neighborhoods. In both cases, our political and emotional commitments inspired an intellectual curiosity regarding the groups with which we worked, and it was that curiosity that compelled us to reach out to these groups as potential research subjects and collaborators in the first instance.

Although we might have been motivated by emotion, politics, and curiosity in the first instance, we were quite deliberate about how we might do more than satisfy our own intellectual curiosities or academic imperatives. This required, first and foremost, a commitment to the idea that we would work collaboratively with the groups and organizations we sought out, seeking to coproduce knowledge with them as opposed to conducting research on them. We are certainly not the first academics to take this approach, but it bears mention as we seek to describe our approach. Further, imperfectly formulated although it might have been at the time, we were both committed to the idea that our work (i.e., work that is recognizable in the context of an academic institution) would not only fulfill the requirements of our employment and our intellectual communities but also specifically advance the work of the community groups with which we collaborated. It was in attempting to realize this commitment that the notion of resourcefulness in relation to scholar-activism was developed. With respect to our work in Govan, this took a number of different forms and required us to carefully consider what resources and skill sets of value we brought to the collaboration. We had to consider the value (if any) placed on our (academic) expertise by others, as well as our nonacademic skills and the material resources we can marshal.

Thus, we approached representatives of the respective groups by being frank about the political and intellectual commitments that had piqued our curiosity about the work that each group was conducting, discussed broadly how they related back to our larger research program, and proposed a set of material and intellectual resources we might bring to any collaboration. The latter included assistance in designing and conducting research that would advance the mission of the organization, opportunities to propose topics of interest to the organization that students might complete for course projects, assistance with organizing and writing grant applications, as well as the opportunity to be included in any funding bids we developed over the course of the collaboration, and access to professional facilitation of popular education workshops. Crucially, the set of resources we offered required a level of confidence in the value of academic inquiry for

advancing community-based and academic projects. Whereas Derickson's previous research collaborations with community-based groups had entailed a posture of researcher as supplicant (English), wherein she made herself available for any menial task that the organizations with which she worked required, experience had suggested that there is indeed something of value in collaborative research-driven approaches and that critical and engaged academics need not be so timid about offering up the specific skill sets they bring to the table.

Thus, the approach to the coproduction of knowledge that we propose through resourcing and triangulation of the research question requires that scholar-activists challenge their own assumptions about academics' power. Feminists and others were right to raise concerns about power and research and to caution or implore researchers to be more reflexive about how power works in and through the research process, but we want to argue that in some ways, critical and engaged scholars have internalized this problematic too deeply in ways that have become counterproductive. Certainly, as academics we are entangled within broader powers of association and intellectual production—such as the institutions that employ us or fund our research and their location within hierarchies of privilege—that might grant us certain economic, political, and representational securities and advantages that might not be enjoyed by those with whom we collaborate—not least economically marginalized communities in Glasgow (Routledge 2002). We are frequently in a position of power by virtue of our ability to name research categories, control information about the research agenda, shape the character of our interventions, and come and go as researchers (Staeheli and Lawson 1994).

There are a range of powers involved in the process of scholar-activist collaboration, however. For example, the power to define the field of collaboration can belong as much (if not more) to our collaborators as a result of their local knowledge that potentially can grant them a certain power over the construction of the forms, parameters, and dynamics of the collaboration. Scholar-activists are frequently dependent on information, research contacts, advice, and the good graces of our collaborators and can be positioned within their collaborators' broader strategies and agendas (Routledge 2002). We want to propose that instead of a posture of supplicant, scholar-activists should adopt an approach more akin to what Nagar and Geiger (2007) call "situated solidarities" built on mutual trust, admiration, and benefit. Unlike the posture of supplicant, this opens the door for scholar-activists to engage, constructively challenge approaches and assumptions, and engage in a genuine coproduction of knowledge without being stymied or silenced by hand-wringing over power relations.

Although concerns about power relations can render scholar-activists disinclined to voice even the slightest critique of activist practice, in our experience, thoughtful engagement, carefully articulated once collaborative relationships have been established, can be quite productive. For example, Derickson was involved in an ongoing inquiry group convened by community groups in Govan that sought to develop the concepts of resilience and self-reliance in relation to the community of Govan. Based on years of thinking about and engaging with the political ideologies of neoliberalism, revanchism, and upward redistribution—particularly in relation to what Peck and Tickell (2002) have taken to calling "responsibility without power" that characterizes ever evolving neoliberal governing strategies at present—the idea that self-reliance and resilience were the goals toward which the deeply deprived residents of Govan ought to strive sat uncomfortably with Derickson and did not reflect the principles that she heard articulated by residents and community leaders during meetings. Rather, based on months of participation and engagement, it struck Derickson that notions of self-determination and resourceful communities, rather than self-reliant and resilient communities, were a more accurate representation of the goals of the community groups. When raised with the group in a respectful and frank way, after a solid and consistent relationship was established over months of collaboration and resourcing, the group was open to and interested in Derickson's concerns with and observations about the limitations of resilience. Illustrative of the nuanced nature of the multidirectional flow of power in these kinds of relationships, they did not abandon resilience as a useful term for their work, but they did work with Derickson to flesh out the concept of community resourcefulness as a different way of getting at some of the political objectives they were interested in working toward. We want to emphasize here that Derickson's contributions were effective and relevant only because she was able to work with the groups over an extended period of time in ways that were not always solely focused on traditional "data collection" but rather as a participant working to advance the broader objectives of the organizations.

Such spaces of encounter can generate dialogical contacts that enable activist assumptions to be opened up for analysis and negotiation. For example, the Economic and Social Research Council-funded workshops in Govan created communicative spaces that brought together different classes, ages, and ethnicities in productive and generative ways, building relationships across difference, enabling a sharing of their different experiences, concerns, and knowledges concerning economic deprivation and environmental injustice. These produced empathies between activists from different campaigns and challenged their assumptions about their own agency, so that one workshop participant noted that she had begun to see herself as an "active subject of change" (Interview, Govan, Scotland, 2011). Assumptions about solidarity and similarity among activists were also challenged. Hence, during the workshops, conflicts arose concerning approaches to and practices of social change that reflected differences in the age and social class of antipoverty and environmental justice activists.

Therefore, one of the key tasks of scholar activism is to attempt to find, generate, and resource potential rather than only provide intellectual critique, to contribute to practices that are aimed at social transformation rather than merely the production of knowledge or the solving of local problems (see also Chatterton, Fuller, and Routledge 2008). The aim is to put into practice principles of solidarity, equality, pluralism, and horizontality to resource the potential to establish counterpower to the alienation and dislocation associated with contemporary capitalism. In part, this involves the politics of prefiguration that theorizes action through doing, fashioning alternatives through lived practice (see, e.g., Graeber 2002; Maeckelbergh 2011), while also recognizing that such practices constantly require the negotiation of unequal power relations (see Routledge 2002; Chatterton, Fuller, and Routledge 2008).

By offering these examples, we want to draw an emphatic distinction between the coproduction of knowledge and the kind of give and take and mutuality that underlies the approach that we took and the mode of engagement that Harvey (2000) has called critical distance, in which he seeks to find sufficient distance to generate global ambitions in what he calls dialectical engagement with lived lives or militant particularisms. Although we share many of Harvey's utopian visions, we read his work as taking theoretical practice as his primary concern or the pathway through which he chooses to work toward those utopian visions. This strikes us as an ironically Hegelian or idea-driven approach. By contrast, the process of triangulating the research question attempts to recognize the value of intellectual and academic inquiry while refusing the act of distancing that Harvey proposes. Instead, as we see it, the theoretical inquiry must always be accountable to rather than distant from actually existing community-based activism.

Resourcing Scholar-Activism

We have written this intervention with the intention of proposing possible strategies for doctoral students, early career scholars, or established researchers who are faced with the struggles, dilemmas, and institutional disincentives of attempting to balance the vicissitudes of activism, the resourcing of research collaborators, and the writing of either successful PhDs or publishable research articles. We have proposed the notion of triangulating the research question to suggest possible ways to evaluate an academic research project against the standards of scholar-activism, assuming that academic research is just one element of the myriad practices that an engaged and committed scholar-activist would be engaged in. Further, we have suggested ways that scholar-activists can engage in (hopefully) fulfilling activism and contribute meaningfully to academic debates. As such, the different yet entangled sites of intervention that we propose provide some preliminary spaces of encounter within which such resourceful scholar-activism might take place. ∎

Notes

1 We recognize that grassroots organizations produce their own knowledges, that coproduction of knowledge between scholar-activists and such organizations is possible and that scholar-activists collaborate with organizations because there is resonance with their beliefs, feelings, research interests, and so on, and that through the act of collaboration useful knowledge can emerge.

2 See http://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/2004–05–27/news/indian-givers/ accessed 9/1/2013

3 "Community Roots" and "Govan Connections" are pseudonyms.

4 In particular, with doctoral researcher and activist Aaron Franks.

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