

ACADEMY VS. ACTIVISM

THEORY VS. PRACTICE



Knowledge + Action = Praxis!

"You can't give the people a program until they realize they need one, and until they realize that all existing programs aren't ... going to reproduce ... results. What we would like to do ... is to go into our problem and just analyze ... and question things that you don't understand so we can ... get a better picture of what faces us. If you give people a thorough understanding of what it is that confronts them, and the basic causes that produce it, they'll create their own program; and when the people create a program you get action." --Malcolm X

"The essence of revolutionary action is dialogue." --Paolo Freire

"[Popular education] may mislead people into the false consciousness of thinking that they transform the world by transforming their thinking. It may mislead people into thinking that their self-realization and cognitive changes alone are enough to change the community. Education can raise consciousness, but is it enough to create community change?" --Barry Checkoway

"Consciousness raising [does not], as some have implied, assume that increased awareness, knowledge, or education alone will eliminate male supremacy. In consciousness-raising, through shared experience, one learns that uncovering the truth, that naming what's really going on, is necessary but insufficient for making changes. With greater understanding, one discovers new necessity for action--and new possibilities for it. Finding the solution to a problem takes place through theory and action both. Each leads to the other but both are necessary or the problem is never really solved." --Kathir Sarachild

This is where I start talking about things in a positive light. Reading over other stuff I have written for this issue, I realize that my attitude can be overwhelmingly ... negative. Believe me, I do get tired of pointing fingers and saying how fucked up the whole world is. I am actually an optimist in many ways. I couldn't do the work I do (outreach and community education around domestic and sexual violence), if I weren't an optimist and believed in social change. A pessimist would say fuck it, women are always going to get raped and beaten and killed so why waste your energy? As an optimist, I say that I'm not going to just sit down and let violence against women continue; I am going to bust my ass and contribute to the movement and try to change the world. You have to be an optimist if you're going to be politically active; what's the point of activism if you don't believe that change is possible, that you can make things happen? Not that I'm not cynical, but I can say these things because I'm only 23 and haven't quite hit the burnout point yet.

I believe in art and theory and direct action. All these combined, in my mind, create praxis. I can't stop thinking about praxis, about how to engage in it on an everyday basis. Writing and thinking and talking and creating and doing.

When I went to the Color of Violence conference in April, I was so awestruck by the powerful women of color activists and academics who spoke. They were so so inspiring. They made me want to get active get active get active and to learn learn learn and to fight fight fight. I wanted to be like them, to do awesome work and then to talk and write about it and inspire other people to do the same, to be like Angela Davis and Dorothy Roberts and Urvashi Vaid and Haunani Kay-Trask and Luana Ross and all of the other wonderful women there. It's about education and inspiration. The conference pulled me in two different directions: on the one hand, it made me want to go back to school and learn as much as possible; on the other hand, it made me want to concentrate more of my efforts around organizing and direct action. A great thing about the conference was the way that it linked scholarship with activism, bringing together academics and people who work in the anti-domestic and sexual violence movements. I was amazed and very happy when some of the non-academics called the scholars on their use of inaccessible language (e.g. "reification" and "discourse").

Norma Alarcón spoke about "academic time" vs. "real time," and I thought about how theory can be

frustrating because it does not usually have immediate results, at least not the same kind as direct action methods do. But theory so often inspires me, it makes me want to get out there and organize. In college, I often found myself drawn to professors of color as mentors, and I saw many of my friends of color to do the same. Sometimes I fantasize about becoming an academic in order to be a role model for students of color. At the same time, I recognize how much racist garbage professors of color went through at the hands of the administration and other professors, and am scared of being subjected to a similar fate. One of my mentors went through hell getting tenure, and once she earned it, was forced to quit because of the constant harassment by others who believed she only received tenure because she is a woman of color. Despite all that she's gone through, she is also one of the people who has advised me to continue my studies and go for an advanced degree. When I consider going to grad school, I worry about getting consumed by theory and academia, of putting so much of my energy into thinking and writing that I become politically inactive. My last semester of college I tried to convince my project advisor why I was doing a community organizing internship instead of going to grad school; I clearly remember telling him, "But I want to be political!" I'm sure he had a good chuckle at my naive idealism. And now, when I think about continuing my work as a paid activist, I worry about becoming burned out and disillusioned real fast and too exhausted to read or talk about theory anymore.

This essay is supposed to be about praxis. Helen and I have often emailed each other about wanting to figure out a way to bridge academia with activism. "If you find out", one of us wrote to the other, "let me know!" Eventually I might actually take the damn GRE and apply to grad school and start researching eugenics and sterilization programs in Japanese internment camps. But for now, I am in a good place. I am drawn to theory because I see its connection to popular education and consciousness-raising. I strongly believe that education is a means to achieving social change, that it is one of the most important first steps of community and political organizing. And that's exactly what I get to do with my job right now. I am engaging in praxis. I was so excited at my job interview a year ago when one of the questions was about how I thought community education related to organizing. I was so excited to go off on the idea that in order for people to organize around an issue, they need to know that there is an issue in the first place. You present the problem to people and then they say "Gosh we need to do something about this!" At work we are constantly theorizing about oppression and its link to domestic and sexual violence, and it is my job to talk to people about these issues; through talking about it, consciousness is being raised, and a chord is struck in some people to take action in their personal lives, lend political support, donate money, and become volunteers and activists themselves. Organizing. Knowledge and action. Theory and practice. Praxis. If I do decide someday to reach for the ivory tower, I hope that I can keep these things in mind.

So this is my inspirational piece. Read! Go to lectures! Rent documentaries! Go out there and raise your consciousness! Write! Make art! Talk! Get active get active get active!

Lauren Martin: Quantify #2 (USA, 2000)

::Subculture, Activism, and Academia::

I've been thinking a lot about my identity lately, since I'm trying to evaluate what is important in my life and what I want to do with myself. Somewhere around my junior year of college I suddenly realized that I was definitely changing. My interests were broadening, I was spending a good deal of time with people I'd have snubbed a year or two before, and I was spending less time doing the things that had once mattered to me most – playing music, going to shows, writing zines, and hanging out.

When I first took a step back from my super busy schedule to notice this I freaked out a bit. It was like the scene in *Teenwolf* when Scotty notices long tufts of hair growing out of the backs of his hands. When something about you is changing, and it's not a result of some conscious decision you've made, your first instinct is to yell, "What the fuck is going on here?!" and do whatever you can to make it stop.

But eventually Scotty realized there were plenty of benefits to being a *Teenwolf* – he could surf on top of vans and play basketball really well. What he was changing into wasn't really that bad, he just needed to be conscious of it and more in control. And after a while I realized that it's the same way with me.

I used to identify as a punk or a hardcore kid. I felt like that category pretty much summed up my identity, and I was comfortable thinking about myself that way. But now, after four years of college, and lots of work in the labor, Affirmative Action, anti-prison, and anti-globalization movements, I identify as something more complex. Something along the lines of a *radical academic punk activist*.

Sometimes I feel a bit like a walking Venn diagram – you know, those charts with the intersecting circles from high school science class. I can believably play any of these roles – punk/hardcore kid, student/cultural theory buff, activist/organizer – separately, and I'm eager to talk with and learn from people coming from each of these perspectives. But I feel most complete, most understood, and most at home with those that, like me, exist in the intersection of these lifestyles, roles, and perspectives.



Figure 1.
Venn Diagram representing the intersectionality of Andrew Cornell.

In Women's Studies courses they often talk about the "intersectionality" of women's (or men's) lives. The categories most often discussed in that context are gender, race, and class. Intersectionality means that you can't talk, for instance, about all women just as women, because the other aspects of their lives (like race and gender) also have huge impacts on who they are that you can't ever completely separate out or ignore. It means that one category they fit into might be at odds with another category. The classic example from my classes is: women of color might want to organize with men of color to fight racism, but in so doing they might have to deal with the men of color's sexism. Categories of race, class, and gender are huge aspects of my personality as well, and I discuss them at length elsewhere in this zine. But the concept of intersectionality definitely applies on a personal level with the punk/academic/activist categories also, since all those identities are incredibly important to me, but the groups of people associated with them are often at odds with each other. I've come to realize that I really need all three in my life. Each one fills in where the others are lacking.

Punk gives me a culture – a set of values, a community of people I feel bonded with, a broader vision of a more satisfying lifestyle, the beginnings of independent institutions. It gives me an identity and an alternative aesthetics that appeals to me. In many ways it is the seed of the end goal I envision – the goal for which all my work is supposed to lead up to. Punk is passion, its idealism, it gives me a sense of hope and urgency and possibilities.

Academia gives me a broader base of knowledge and gives me the history of how things got to be the way they are. (Wouldn't it be awesome to have a history book titled, "How Everything Got So Fucked Up"?) It forces me to articulate my beliefs. It is systematic and rational. It teaches me how to prove things, and win arguments with people who disagree with me. It introduces me to people who I wouldn't have otherwise spoken with who share some of the ideas and goals I do. It gives me new words to describe new ideas. It is theoretical. It is important because action needs to be based on thought.

Activism is strategic, it is reasoned, and it requires discipline, commitment, and hard work. It brings a sense of accomplishment. It connects me with people of very different backgrounds than my own. It actually challenges authority. It moves beyond the cultural and beyond the personal. It puts words into action. It gives me a sense of purpose, and it is a pursuit that I feel good about dedicating my time too.

I realized I naturally started changing because I needed to, because I wasn't fulfilled being just a hardcore kid anymore. Now I'm trying to seek a balance of the things important to me, which definitely is not easy. It's weird to say, "No I'm not going to the Modest Mouse show, I've got to stay here and read three chapters of *The Visual Culture Reader*." Or, on the other hand to say, "No, I'm not going to that rally, I really need to go see Catharsis play."

But I'm really glad that I'm at least trying to work it all out because the alternative seems utterly depressing. I know so many people that have gotten to the same point as me – they see too many contradictions in the DIY music scene, it doesn't do enough to stimulate them anymore, and they start to question its importance and usefulness. So a lot of people five up on it completely, and walk away from it. But I think too often that leaves a hole too. And it's a hard hole to fill because meaningful, passionate culture is in somewhat short supply these days. And besides it takes a long time to really feel a part of a group like that.

The problem, it seems to me, is that subcultures are really rooted in the structural conditions of our lives – to things like living at your parent's house and going to high school. So when those conditions change, we're left fumbling for how hardcore (or whatever subculture you are involved in) fits into your life. The truth is that it can't play the exact same role, and you will just get disillusioned with it if you try to force it to. But that doesn't mean it can't play some role. We need to have new ways to conceive of punk. We need to make it fit us, instead of limiting ourselves so we can continue to fit it.

In the article on punk as ethnicity, I offer some further thoughts on this. But before that I want to throw out some tangential ideas that popped into my head while I've been writing this.

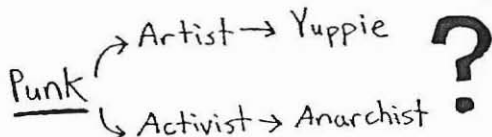
::Subculture and Activism::

You might ask why I think of hardcore and activism as two distinct parts of my life. Doesn't being punk entail being an activist? I used to think it did as well, but now I realize that while there might be some overlap, they're not totally the same. In high school they pretty much were the same for me, for a few reasons. First, the hardcore I listened to – Born Against, Spitboy, Ebullition stuff – was explicitly political. Secondly, there wasn't any real visible political organizing going on in my small hometown outside of what punk kids were doing (like passing out PETA pamphlets). And finally, being a punk with any degree of self-righteousness and pride at my school necessarily entailed being an activist. Challenging homophobia, fighting with preachy Christian teachers, wearing controversial clothes that the school tried to prohibit, correcting patriotic history, being straight-edge, being anti-consumerist, and having self-confidence in the face of constant harassment were all ways of challenging power structures, which is one way to define activism.

But after leaving high school I found out that there was tons of activism outside of punk. There are people of different generations and backgrounds doing activism. It was weird to walk into my friend

Peter's bedroom – on one wall he had a big poster of Che Guevara, but the opposite wall was covered with hockey posters. That fucked with me because all the radicals I knew thought hockey was totally stupid and wrong. That hockey was itself something to fight against, or at least "hockey loving culture" or something. Then I met Ethyl who is my grandmother's age, a member of the elderly radical group The Grey Panthers, and who wears a "Free Mumia" T-shirt all the time.

Activism can be a solitary pursuit, but I've found out that to be more effective you have to also be an organizer – someone who moves other people to become activists themselves, and who works in unison with other activists strategically. It requires you to be proactive – not just defending yourself and your beliefs. It often requires you to go to meetings, analyze leverage points, develop a strategy, and build coalitions. Building coalitions takes you far outside of punk and requires you to do things directly opposite of what punk ideals would suggest, like working with progressive religious leaders on certain issues. Broader activism shows you the shortfalls of punk ideology.



Now I see that all hardcore isn't inherently political and that a lot of hardcore kids aren't involved in broader struggles. The politics that I used to think of as an essential

defining aspect of hardcore, too often looks like nothing more than another spent fad like Power Violence and the Gravity Records sound. Making DIY music is cultural resistance, and it is important, but it's not all that we can, should, and need to do. So being an activist or an organizer entails doing things other punk kids don't necessarily do. In fact, I think one of the greatest mistakes a lot of punk activists make is assuming that punk kids are the only activists or potential activists around.

Figure 2.

::Subculture and Academia::

Being rooted in all these activities gives me unique perspectives. I spent my four years of college getting a degree in American Culture, which is a program that combines some history and literature with a lot of social and cultural theory. The professors taught a lot of things I already knew from participating in DIY hardcore/punk. It's pretty gratifying when a philosophy professor gives a three hour lecture on Nietzsche and you can recite Born Against and Team Dresch lyrics that say the exact same thing, but in only two lines (that rhyme!). Cultural Studies is considered a radical discipline because it critiques the affects of economic and political systems on people's everyday lives. It does this very thoroughly and precisely, which is completely exciting to me, but it's also incredibly frustrating to a punk and activist like me, because so many academics seem uninterested or unable to do anything concrete with their insights.

I've been thinking about how studying sociology or cultural studies must be a somewhat different experience for people involved in a sub-culture or counter-culture and those who aren't. Those who enter college as "normal" or mainstream people find in cultural studies a compelling criticism of society. They learn about things like feminism, class divisions, and the media monopoly, but they rarely seem to have the will or creativity to help create alternatives. They say things like "Power works _____ way," or "_____ is represented in this image." But sadly, it seems like many of them get trapped in the process of criticism. They can't go back and embrace the dominant culture blindly, like most other people do, but they don't have a counter-culture they can jump into either. So they are left in the culture of academia – the culture of big words, perfect bound journals, and teaching bored students what they learned a few years earlier.

But it's a different story when people entering college have already rejected the dominant culture on their own terms. If you've begun developing a new culture with alternate values and alternate institutions, a culture with its own language, and currents of discussion, like hardcore kids have, before studying "social sciences" you can use the academic classes differently.

When you learn some new idea or realize how two issues are connected, you use that knowledge to fill in holes of your own critique – it reinforces your already strong beliefs and reaffirms the importance of the work you are doing to create alternatives, instead of just further obliterating the only ground you know to stand on. And a person from a subculture doesn't have to use the academic language. Academic mumbo jumbo ("a subjective discourse reifies the post structural impulse...") might be the only language of dissent from the status quo the mainstream student knows, but for a punk kid, or someone from another counter culture (like hip hop, perhaps) it constitutes a third option. We have our own language and forms of dissent (i.e., Downcast and Propagandhi lyrics or Seth Tobacman graphics) plus the academic ones. Additionally the punk college kids are starting from and will eventually probably go back to a culture of opposition – we have participated in acts of rebellion and meaning creation for years. Before college we were in bands, did zines, wore clothes that articulated alternate values, distributed zines and records, set up benefit shows, and wrote people from across the country. We've been creating our own culture, while simultaneously critiquing dominant culture, for years. Many academic cultural theory buffs have never done any sort of cultural creation by the time they're in their 50's – they've only read and written about how culture is created, and pointed out the shortcomings and successes of other people's attempts.

So, authentic subcultures and countercultures have something to offer academics: an identity other than "academic" or mainstream, practical experiments in implementing new values instead of simply wishing for them, a language more accessible to the "masses," networks of like minded people, and some fucking guts to openly dissent and fight the culture one hates. In fact, probably the broadest, most important changes in college teaching styles, curriculums, literary canons, and academic critiques of society came with the rise of the politicized counter-cultures of the 1960s. So, anyway, shout outs to all the college punks. The Routledge Crew will mosh all over the Verso Crew in 2001!!! Uh...yeah.

If you too can't take the whole academic pompousness seriously – that is if you want to demystify the elitism of the ivory tower – get in touch because I'm thinking of doing a spoof Cult Studs zine with jokes about Foucault and Stuart Hall, and what not. It will be incredibly stupid. So please participate.

Andy Cornell: The Secret Files of Captain Sissy #4 (USA, 2001)

WHAT'S THAT SMELL? QUEER TEMPORALITIES AND SUBCULTURAL LIVES

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Queer space/queer time

'Hot topic': the death of the expert

[L]et us consider the relations between subcultural producers and queer cultural theorists. Queer subcultures encourage blurred boundaries between archivists and producers, which is not to say that this is the only subcultural space within which the theorist and the cultural worker may be the same people. Minority subcultures in general tend to be documented by former or current members of the subculture rather than by 'adult' experts. Nonetheless, queer subcultures in particular are often marked by this lack of distinction between the archivist and the cultural worker. A good example of this blurring between producer and analyst would be Dr Vaginal Creme Davis, a drag queen who enacts, documents and theorizes an array of drag characters. Another would be Juanita Mohammed, Mother of the House of Mashood, a women's drag house in Manhattan. Mohammed keeps a history of the participation of women of color in the drag cultures even as she recruits new 'children' to the House of Mashood. Mohammed also goes one step further in making herself central to AIDS activism in relation to queers of color.

The queer archivist or theorist and the cultural workers may also coexist in the same friendship networks and may function as co-conspirators. A good example of this relation would be academic Tammy Rae Carland who runs independent record label Mr Lady, manages dyke punk band The Butchies and is also a college professor. Finally, the academic and the cultural producer may see themselves in a complementary relationship; Le Tigre, for example, a riot dyke band, have a song called 'Hot Topic' in which they name the women, academics, filmmakers, musicians and producers who have inspired them and whom they want to inspire: 'Carol Rama and Eleanor Antin/Yoko Ono and Carole Schneeman/You're getting old, that's what they'll say, but I don't give a damn, I'm listening anyway.'

More typically, cultural theorists have looked to groups of which they are not necessarily a part, most often youth subcultures, for an encapsulated expression of the experiences of a subordinated class. The youth subculture then becomes the raw material for a developed theory of cultural resistance or the semiotics of style or some other discourse that now leaves the subculture behind. For a new generation of queer theorists – a generation moving on from the split between densely theoretical queer theory in a psychoanalytic mode, on the one hand, and strictly ethnographic queer research, on the other – new queer cultural studies feeds off of and back into subcultural production. The academic might be the archivist or a co-archivist or they might be a fully-fledged participant in the subcultural scene that they write about. Only rarely does the queer theorist stand wholly apart from the subculture, examining it with an expert's gaze.

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Shooting stars: queer

[T]he nature of queer subcultural activity requires a nuanced theory of archives and archiving. Work on archives and archiving is well underway and can be found in the work of an eclectic group of queer cultural theorists including Ann Cvetkovich (2003), Lauren Berlant (1997) and Jose Munoz (1996). Ideally, an archive of queer subcultures would merge ethnographic interviews with performers and fans with research in the multiple archives that already exist online and in other unofficial sites. Queer zines, posters, guerilla art and other temporary artifacts would make up some of the paper archives and descriptions of shows along with the self-understandings of cultural

producers, which would provide supplementary materials. But the notion of an archive has to extend beyond the image of a place to collect material or hold documents and it has to become a floating signifier for the kinds of lives implied by the paper remnants of shows, clubs, events and meetings. The archive is not simply a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory and a complex record of queer activity. In order for the archive to function, it requires users, interpreters, cultural historians to wade through the material and piece together the jigsaw puzzle of queer history in the making.

While some of the work of queer archiving certainly falls to academics, cultural producers also play a big role in constructing queer genealogies and memories. As we saw in Le Tigre's song, the lyrics to 'Hot Topic' create an eclectic encyclopedia of queer cultural production through unlikely juxtapositions ('Gayatri Spivak and Angela Davis/Laurie Weeks and Dorothy Allison') and claim a new poetic logic: 'Hot topic is the way that we rhyme/hot topic is the way that we rhyme.' In other words, the historically situated theorists, filmmakers and musicians rhyme with each other's work – the rhyme is located in the function and not in the words. Similarly, while many lesbian punk bands *do* trace their influences back to male punk or classic rock, as we saw in the last section, contrary to what one may expect, they do not completely distance themselves from or counter-identify with 1970s and 1980s 'women's music'. In fact, some dykecore bands see themselves as very much a part of a tradition of loud and angry women. On their album *Are We Not Femme?*, for example, North Carolina-based band The Butchies perform a cover of feminist goddess Cris Williamson's classic song 'Shooting Star'. Williamson's soaring emotion-laden song becomes a tough percussive anthem in the capable hands of The Butchies, who add drum rolls and screeching guitars to lift the song out of a woman-loving-woman groove and into a new era. On their liner notes, The Butchies thank Cris Williamson for 'being radical and singing songs to girls before too many others were and for writing such a kickass song'. If we look at the covers of The Butchies' and Cris Williamson's CDs, it would be hard to detect the connections between the two. The Butchies CD pays obvious homage to punk concept band Devo both in terms of its title (Devo's first album was called *Are We Not Men?*) and in terms of its iconography. The connection between The Butchies and Cris Williamson runs much deeper than their relation to punk bands such as Devo. The Butchies appear on the cover wearing short red leather mini-skirts, which echo the red plastic flowerpot hats worn by Devo on the cover of *Are We Not Men?*. Williamson, on the other hand, appears in dungarees and stands in what looks like U2's *Joshua Tree* desert. Her album title, *The Changer and the Changed*, references a modality of mutuality, organic transformation and reciprocity. The song itself, in her hands, tells of 'wonderful moments on the journey through my desert'. She sings of 'crossing the desert for you' and seeing a shooting star, which reminds her of her lover. The spectral image of the shooting star figures quite differently in The Butchies' version, where it takes on more of the qualities of a rocket than a galactic wonder. But The Butchies' cover version of Williamson's song has the tone of tribute rather than parody, and by making her song relevant for a new generation of listeners, The Butchies refuse the model of generational conflict and build a bridge between their raucous spirit of rebellion and the quieter acoustic world of women's music from the 1970s and 1980s.

In an excellent essay on 'The Missing Link: Riot Grrrl, Feminism, Lesbian Culture', Mary Celeste Kearney (1997) also points to the continuity rather than the break between women's music and riot grrrl. Kearney argues that links between earlier modes of lesbian feminism and contemporary riot grrrl productions are regularly ignored in favor of a history that casts riot grrrl as the female offspring of male-dominated punk. Like the new grrrl productions, women's music by Alix Dobkins, Cris Williamson and others was produced on independent labels (like Olivia Records) and received only scant mainstream attention. The earlier music was made for, by and about women, and, while much of it did consist of folk-influenced ballads, there was also a hard and angry subgenre which combined lyrics about manhating with loud guitar playing (Maxine Feldman's music, for example). As Kearney points out, however, the non-commercial practices of 1970s lesbian musicians have made them less easy to identify as major influences upon a new generation of 'all-girl community', and thus, while women's music is erased as a musical influence, so lesbianism is ignored as a social context for riot grrrl. Kearney writes

In spite of the coterminous emergence in the US of riot grrrl and queercore bands like Tribe 8, Random Violet, The Mudwimmin and Team Dresch, there have been relatively few links made by the mainstream press between lesbian feminism, queercore and riot grrrl. (1997: 222)

Other lesbian punk or punk/folk bands see themselves both as heirs to an earlier generation of 'pussy power' and as pioneers of new genres. Bitch and Animal, for example, authors of 'The Pussy Manifesto', describe their album *What's that Smell?* as 'tit rock'. In live performances, Bitch plays an electric violin and Animal plays an array of percussion instruments. Their songs, like those of The Butchies, are themselves archival records of lesbian subculture. One song from *What's that Smell?* is called 'Drag King Bar' and it posits the drag king bar as an alternative to a rather tired mainstream lesbian scene. With Animal picking out a 'yee-hah' tune on the banjo, Bitch sings about a place where 'all the boys were really girls and the fags whip out their pearls'. Bitch tells of being picked up by one particularly bold king, and the song ends in a rousing symphony of violin and drums. Bitch and Animal document and celebrate the emergence of a drag king scene in contemporary queer clubs and blend country-influenced folk with avantgarde percussion to do so. But their cover art and their manifestos hark back to an era of women-loving-women in their embrace of the female body; furthermore, on their website, fans are encouraged to take up terms like 'pussy' and 'tits' with pride by brushing off the taint of patriarchal insult. Like the The Butchies' decision to cover a Cris Williamson song, Bitch and Animal's pussy power reaches out to an earlier generation of women musicians, refusing once and for all the oedipal imperative to overthrow the old and bring on the new. Recent women's music festivals such as Ladyfest are also clear inheritors of a tradition of lesbian feminist music festivals and revive an earlier model of feminism for a new generation of grrrls.

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Judith Halberstam: *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (USA, 2004)

UNCOVERING OUR WORK: THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE IN ACADEMIA AND ACTIVISM

Excerpts of a thesis: http://etd.fcla.edu/UF/UFE0010495/guest_a.pdf

The Academic/Activist Divide

In the academic/activist divide people often get quickly classified as intellectuals *or* activists, and while some categories have been created to reflect people who bridge that gap (i.e., public intellectuals and activist professors), even they remain at the level of categorization. The public intellectual and the activist professor are not threats to either category because they are still categories; by creating a new category we remove any threat they are to the old categories. Now these people are free to flit about and be "public" or be an "activist" without bothering anyone else because they have seemingly bridged an insurmountable gap. Much less do we need to worry about what it means to be an intellectual or an activist (or, god forbid, both). However, what these people have actually accomplished is a strange dislocation of both fields by trying to merge them into one.

I believe an effective way of examining intellectuals and activists would be to first look at stereotypes. When I think of an intellectual I think of one of my college professors; he is a man who is renowned in his field, but whom I rarely saw. His work is so esoteric that it must be brilliant; I just haven't received my pass code to it yet. When I think of an activist I think of one of my friends from college who was always the first to jump on every cause that passed by. She would sometimes protest just for the sake of it. Now, at this point, I'm even rolling my eyes at how reductive these portraits are. No, I'm not trying to say that every intellectual is a man, or that esoteric work is not beneficial, or that all activists are women, or that it is not productive to effect social change for more than one cause (or any other stereotypes I may appear to have subscribed to in the space of five sentences). What I am trying to say, though, is that, while these stereotypes are remarkably simple in their analysis of each category, they are also remarkably (in the re-markable; say it again, sense) on target in how these categories often get constituted. A certain idea becomes the norm and then sets the tone for how people "should" be or work. Even though individuals vary widely from the stereotype, or categorical assumptions, those assumptions still taint the air because of their uncontested status. They shape individual subjectivities by virtue of the way they define meaning on multiple levels (Aithusser 115-117).

In "The Responsibility of Intellectuals" (a title replete with the categorization of intellectuals), Noam Chomsky outlines the myriad roles intellectuals can play: Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. In the Western world, at least, they have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression. For a privileged minority, Western democracy provided the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us. (Chomsky 255)

Chomsky acknowledges the comparatively marginal role intellectuals have in terms of sheer number, but he then infuses them with power unparalleled by anyone next to those in the government. The impetus for Chomsky's article is the Vietnam War. He begins by referencing a question from an article written briefly after WWII by Dwight Macdonald which asks: "To what extent are the British or American people responsible for the vicious terror bombings of civilians" (qtd. in Chomsky 254). Chomsky then uses this question as a springboard for how intellectuals have the responsibility to "speak the truth and expose lies" because they can easily become complicitous. Throughout the article he gives examples of how "in no small measure, it is [complicitous] attitudes...that lie behind

the butchery in Vietnam, and we had better face up to them with candor, or we will find our government leading us towards a 'final solution' in Vietnam, and in the many Vietnams that inevitably lie ahead" (Chomsky 291). While intellectuals do have a privileged position, Chomsky is unwilling to assess them as a whole. Not even most privileged intellectuals are in the same unique position as Chomsky himself and can hope to effect political change. As Stanley Fish reminds us, "Despite occasional appearances to the contrary, the conversation that takes place within the humanistic academy and the conversation that leads to legislative and administrative action remain segregated from one another" (61). Noam Chomsky's career is one of these exceptions, but from that we cannot extrapolate the powers of intellectuals in general. By defining more "shoulds" than "coulds," his vision falls hopelessly short. A limited conception of intellectuals such as this overlooks the inherent categorical difference it establishes. Difference can be utilized as a way to oppose rigid categorization, but not when it is used to polarize rather than create new meaning.

Antonio Gramsci provides a clearer definition of intellectuals in a broad range of society. He discusses how the historical evolution of traditional intellectuals (i.e. ecclesiastics) came to oppose the "organic intellectuals" who evolved from each class as it developed its own specializations (Gramsci 6-8). Gramsci's use of the term "organic intellectuals" speaks to his question about What are the 'maximum' limits of acceptance of the term 'intellectual'? Can one find a unitary criterion to characterize equally all the diverse and disparate activities of intellectuals and to distinguish these at the same time and in an essential way from the activities of other social groupings? The most widespread error of method seems to me that of having looked for this criterion of distinction in the intrinsic nature of intellectual activities, rather than in the ensemble of the system of relations in which these activities (and therefore the intellectual groups who personify them) have their place within the general complex of social relations. (Gramsci 8) Here Gramsci seeks to put "intellectuals" in a context and avoids categorizing them in a way that looks only back towards what they "should" have been and does not look towards what they are or "can be." This move locates individuals within the category as a locus of change rather than locating the category itself as the only site of that possibility. Activism is often seen as promoting individualism; however, this category, like all others, seeks to prioritize its categorization. In "Beyond Activism," Liza Featherstone, Doug Henwood, and Christian Parenti argue that today's activists do not lack thought in their action:

[they] do indeed have a creed: They're activists. That's right, activists....In this worldview, all roads lead to more activism and more activists. And the one who acts is righteous.... Activism as an ideology renders taboo any discussion of ideas or beliefs, and thus stymies both thought and action. Activists who treat ideas as important—who ask the difficult questions that push into new political terrain—find this censorious hyperpragmatism alienating and may drop away from organizing as a result. But that's not the only problem. Without an analysis of what's really wrong with the world or a vision of the better world they're trying to create, people have no reason to continue being activists once a particular campaign is over (72-74).

And the problems, folks, do not end there. They go on to accuse activism of a number of crimes against thinking, and they end up calling for "an assault of the stupidity that pervades American culture. This implies a more democratic approach to the life of the mind. We challenge left activists to become intellectuals" (Featherstone, Henwood, and Parenti 75).

Sounds good, right? We are finally going to get rid of reality TV! Oh wait, is that the stupidity they are talking about? Who knows! The underlying problem of their assertions is, again, categorization. They create a new catch phrase, and category, with activists, that seems to sweep all the old problems of activism (and activists) under the rug. Except that, it doesn't. Activism creates innumerable more problems than activism because it does not bother to define activism, or thinking.

The subtitle of the article is "Why we need deeper thinking in our protests." I withheld this until now because I thought you might find it as intriguing as I did at first. It seems that the authors may discuss how thinking and protest connect. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Instead, they try to make one into the other, which leaves both worse than before.

Forcing Academia/Activism

... At a conference after the WTO protests in Seattle and the World Bank and IMF protests in Washington, D.C., people such as Ariana Huffington, Michael Lerner, David Korten, Cornel West, and others gathered to discuss the "lack of 'unity of vision and strategy' guiding the vision against global corporatism" (Klein, "Vision" 265). The participants were supposed to "give birth to a unified movement for holistic social, economic, and political change" (Klein, "Vision" 265). Not only does this goal sound difficult, near impossible, in the space of a few days, but it is also counterintuitive for activists who define their work in terms of individual response:

When critics say that the protesters lack vision, what they are really saying is that they lack an overarching revolutionary philosophy—like Marxism, democratic socialism, deep ecology, or social anarchy—on which they all agree. That is absolutely true, and for this we should all be extraordinarily thankful...It is to this young movement's credit that it has as yet fended off all of these agendas and has rejected everyone's generously donated manifesto, holding out for an acceptably democratic, representative process to take its resistance to the next stage. Perhaps its true challenge is not finding a vision but rather resisting the urge to settle on one too quickly. (Klein, "Vision" 272-273)

These activists move from situated knowledge into their action. The dislocation comes when their action has not been defined—not by outside influence—but by an internal breakdown of the category. Other activist groups feel similarly to the participant at the conference: "ACT UP never entertained the notion that a group must hammer out its analysis before it takes action; it instinctively disdained rallies, where speakers drone on to the already converted" (Kauffman 38). Instead, they preferred to enact their high-profile style of direct action for maximum results (Kauffman 38). This is not to imply that ACT UP had no goals, but rather that they, like many other activist groups "consciously sought to emphasize activist work and praxis over long discussions about philosophy or ideology" (Shepard and Hayduk 8). The dislocation between activist work and knowledge, though, is where we really meet a point of contention in this discussion.

An emphasis on action creates a very particular kind of knowledge. It values specific acts and devalues others. This hierarchical relationship is in direct opposition to activism's self-declared goals of a focus on individuals. By not first examining what activism is and other categories that shape its meaning, activists lose any say in reshaping its meaning. This is because they do not perceive it as something with an overarching meaning to be queried.

The same may be said for academic work that speaks for social change without considering the effect of academic writing or how it links with social change. Writing the paper or doing the research without considering the category of academia (or what social change might be) disregards the myriad forces within and outside the university pressing on our work. Categorization draws a distinction between these two practices, but they may not be so different in the end. When we examine categories and how knowledge is produced within those categories, we see the similarities in practice within each. This is not to say that academia and activism are the same or that they will become one happy category (which would be an oxymoron anyway). Rather, it is to say that locating their common practice as the production of knowledge allows people who work within academy and activism to think about their work beyond the confines of categorization.

...

Activists and the Production of Knowledge

A prevailing myth about activism is that that is all it is about—action. More importantly, the myth maintains the idea that people simply gather together about something they are passionate about and then "do" something about it. They may have to do some internal strategizing, but the action evolves naturally due to the work of the activists. However, this is hardly the case. The apparent ease with which this action takes place covers the process whereby it is possible: an incredible amount of research and theorizing must take place first.

On January 1, 1994, the date of the beginning of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Zapatistas began an armed uprising in the Mexican state of Chiapas that "was the first denunciation of a 'new world order' from the viewpoint of that order's victims" (Hayden 2). This uprising would have been impossible without the previous years of organization and theorizing by its members. The figurehead of the movement, Subcomandante Marcos, describes how the position of the Zapatistas differs from other uprisings: "In previous armies, soldiers used their time to clean their weapons and stock up ammunition. Our weapons are words, and we may need our arsenal at any moment" ("Hourglass" 12). The Zapatistas draw on the power of demystification to give power to their activism. Rather than succumbing to denunciations of action without thought, they consciously expose their processes for scrutiny. Certainly, they invoke this method as deliberately in the production of knowledge as do methods meant to obscure. However, their self-revelatory process exposes their undergirding:

Speaking and listening is how true men and women learn to walk. It is the word that gives form to the walk that goes on inside us. It is the word that is the bridge to cross to the other side. Silence is what Power offers our pain in order to make us small. When we are silenced, we remain very much alone. Speaking, we heal the pain. Speaking, we accompany one another. Power uses the word to impose his empire of silence. We use the word to renew ourselves. Power uses silence to hide his crimes. We use silence to listen to one another, to touch one another, to know one another. This is the weapon, brothers and sisters. We say, the word remains. We speak the word. We shout the word. We raise the word and with it break the silence of our people. We kill the silence by living the word. Let us leave Power alone in what he speaks and hushes. Let us join together in the word and the silence which liberate. (Marcos, "Word" 76)

Marcos's repetition of the word throughout his actions and writings (which are inseparable), show us how an exposure of the processes leads into new forms of activism. It also places individuals and their experiences solidly in the forefront of their movement. Marcos is suspected to be a "former" academic, a Marxist whose academic status is "former" only because he no longer works within a university. Unquestionably, no matter who he is, Marcos's recognition of the similarities between thought and action, academia and activism, fostered the Zapatistas: "He wrote in a torrent, producing hundreds of texts, quickly disproving Hannah Arendt's claim that 'under conditions of tyranny it is far easier to act than to think.' In less than twelve months, during sleepless sessions on the word processor in the midst of fighting a war, [Marcos] generated enough text for a 300-page volume" (Stavans 389). He produced all this writing to explain the Zapatistas' demands, communicate with people outside the movement, and as or more importantly, to engage with people who are drawn by that. The written word became a seductive tool for taking the Zapatistas beyond another group of indigenous people who could easily be dismissed. The Zapatistas combine the power of action and the power of the word to amplify both.

This amplification occurs because the combination of power and action relies upon the similarities between the production of knowledge. Marcos would have been unable to maximize the processes of academia and activism without working with their similarities in production. The similarities allowed him to see how the two categories could communicate with each other, rather than isolate each other, and then the Zapatistas began to build a movement. The Zapatista uprising was not solely activist or academic; instead, it was both.

...

What's the Point?

The question of "why are we doing this again?" sneaks up in unsettling ways for both academics and activists. Both academics and activists often work, in their own ways, on similar issues. However, if they're both producing knowledge, then some questions quickly become forgotten as they are caught up in the process of that production: "So far as the concept of production is concerned, it does not become fully concrete or take on a true content until replies have been given to the questions that it makes possible: 'Who produces?', 'What?', 'How?', 'Why and for whom?' Outside the context of these questions and their answers, the concept of production remains purely abstract" (Lefebvre 69). If we

begin to answer these questions then we can begin to make the production of knowledge more concrete. So our question now is, "what are these people doing, and why?"

In bell hooks's *Talking Back*, she gives voice to voice: changing from object to subject and speaking for oneself. Speaking becomes both a way to engage in active selftransformation and a rite of passage where one moves from object to subject: "Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless—our beings defined and interpreted by others" (hooks 12). In *Talking Back*, hooks creates a conscious discussion between herself, her reader(s), her text, her ideas, and back and forth and in between. She does this to maintain her goal that "[v]isionary feminist theory must be articulated in a manner that is accessible if it is to have meaningful impact" (hooks 39). This question of accessibility delves into the problem of breaking down categories. Accessible to whom? According to whose definition? hooks is quick to point out that her goal "as a feminist thinker and theorist is to take that abstraction and articulate it in a language that renders it accessible—not less complex or rigorous—but simply more accessible" (hooks 39). When we think about accessibility we often think of giving more people the ability to render something available to them: "[a]ccess has a physical connotation—approaching, entering, using. The idea of access is represented metaphorically as passages through doors and gates, over obstacles, barriers, and blockages" (Scott 178). Thinking about access physically is especially interesting in light of a challenge to break down categories—another physical metaphor. Accessibility, like categorization, becomes tricky when left undefined. The idea is enticing that we can make our work, no matter what it is, accessible to others (implicitly—make it matter to others). However, the definition of accessibility changes depending on who gives it. Some people may define accessibility in terms of access for others in the discipline whereas others may define it as institutional access—and anything in between. Accessibility functions as a category because it appears to be relatively simple, but that simplicity masks its underlying processes.

Another question related to accessibility seems to be, why write a paper about how social change is, say, reflected in contemporary novels (or the connection between academia and activism), when you could work on actually effecting that change? Why am I writing this paper rather than "doing" something about the problem I perceive? The answer is simple—because I can. Yet, this is really not a simple answer. The fact remains that, while I can produce this paper, it cannot produce itself. It needs me, it needs the work of other people, and it needs the work of my discipline. In other words, it requires social processes; this is not the exception, it is the norm. And while I can just turn this paper in as the next step on my academic journey and move on without giving it a second thought, I cannot remove it from the production of knowledge. Even if only a handful of people read this paper, it has already interacted in this process because I have engaged in the (multiple) steps necessary for it.

So how does this paper "do" something in its own way? And more importantly, why "should" it? Perhaps we are asking too much of categories. They do not need to interact—they already do. This paper "does" something by interacting in the production of knowledge, which meets up with many other forms of "doing": other academic disciplinary work and various forms of activism. The production of knowledge is the common ground between forms of thinking and doing—it is where they get tossed around and formed into new conceptions of each.

...

Moving from "Activism" to Activism

Within activism, breaking down categorization requires not only movement between movements but also movement within movements. This means that those involved must be willing to engage both their social relations and their theorizing with multiple layers of people in order to connect their work across—not only activism—but other arenas as well. "Activism" becomes activism when it looks beyond its categorical boundaries and moves into an organization of knowledge processes that translate within and beyond categories.

For the Zapatistas, Subcomandante Marcos became "a one-man Web: he is a compulsive communicator, constantly reaching out, drawing connections between different issues and struggles" (Klein, "Unknown" 119). Through this constant communication, he is able to draw in supporters for his movement. He is also able to generate support for a new kind of movement, one based on communication:

[Marcos] has created his own dazzling image as a masked *mito genial*—his term, meaning an inspired act of mythmaking. He has staged a very real, threatening war on the Mexican state based on almost no firepower and a brilliant use of Mexicans' most resonant images: the Revolution, the peasants' unending struggle for dignity and recognition, the betrayed Emiliano Zapata. (Guillermoprieto 37)

The Zapatistas' move towards communication allows them to extend their movement— even into new ones. Their emphasis on communication underlines the connections made at the production of knowledge by doing just that: communicating. This is not a tautology; rather, this assertion shows how the Zapatistas work to expose their work— how it comes about, for whom, and by whom. As they assert how they produce knowledge, they in turn open new avenues for their work because they do not limit its capacity.

The Zapatistas informed other movements that followed them through their strategy of communication:

The Zapatista movement has generated movements of solidarity across the world. At one level it has coalesced around a defense of the oppressed—the exemplary victims of neoliberalism and corporate greed. That is their symbolic power. An anarchist friend of mine suggested to me after Seattle that 'this was all because of the Zapatistas.' Did he mean their example? In part that is what he meant—but beyond that he saw them as representatives of a new politics. Zapatismo does not seek power, only justice; Zapatismo does not acknowledge leaders, but it is democratic in the extreme; Zapatismo is not a party, but a living and changing movement; Zapatismo has used the Internet to create an international connection between all those who reject capitalism red in tooth and claw. (Gonzalez 449-450)

In short, Zapatismo lays the groundwork for exposing the process of the production of knowledge. It does this by placing knowledge in the context from which it came and exposing the hidden "how." It moves from "Activism" to activism by decentralizing categorization and centering the production of knowledge.

Connection between academia and activism give us the chance to look at similarities within and between movements, disciplines, ideas, etc. It gives us a new conceptualization of our own work in the context of others. Rather than viewing our work from the named label, academia or activism, we can view it from something connectedly new. This removes the presumption that we all already know what is going on in any area.

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