Review by Eric Hartman

What if Engaged, Activist Scholarship Is a Moral Imperative?

*I*t is through immersive, community-engaged research that the authors in this volume arrive at a thoroughgoing commitment to activist scholarship. For Reiter, "having lived and worked under truly precarious conditions in the global South puts into perspective the 'plights' of Northern academics and allows for a reassessment of one's role and position in producing social change" *(p. 13)*. Espinosa recalls her student fieldwork in Cusco, Peru:

> Living for a month or so with a peasant family… working in their coffee fields, meeting at night to help these peasant men and women to read and write, and discussing their problems, eating their food, sleeping in their homes, sharing their stories, their poverty and suffering, all that radically changed me. *(p. 49)*

Several of the contributors lived for extended periods in Black Brazilian communities suffering direct police violence and systematic state terror. As a Jamaican-born African American, Perry chooses to blend in during a 4-hour police raid in the community where she is a researcher. Following that terrifying experience, given the option to leave, she stays. Some time later, she cooperates with neighborhood activists to give a visiting NGO representative a tour of the neighborhood. She was therefore implicated when local drug dealers told the activists that they provided a tour to an undercover police officer. Feeling a very real threat to her physical security from both police and criminal elements, Perry realized, "the very methods that endanger our survival as black researchers are the methods necessary to carry out work in solidarity and advance the improvement of black communities" *(p. 164)*.

Through interviews, conversations, and relationships with Brazilian families who lost loved ones to police raids and "death squad assassinations (as police-related forms of violence)," coupled with her own membership in the Black diaspora, Smith comes to feel the spiritual terror systematically deployed to maintain boundaries of the existing social order. Is engaged, activist scholarship a

moral imperative? Smith addresses this question: "Within activist research, we frequently advocate fighting back as if it were a mere political choice, rather than a life or death reality" *(p. 143)*.

Activist Engagement, Transformational Learning, and Sacred Lives

In my own work cooperating with campuses interested in expanding global, engaged learning opportunities, a faculty member recently approached me. "Have you seen research on transformational learning that relates to graduate and faculty researchers?" she asked. She had, only a year or two before, spent several months in a refugee camp in Zambia, and she was still working to understand how to make sense of what she could—*needed*—to do in terms of responding to the human crisis she witnessed.

Her question was insightful. Much of the research on critical reflection and transformational learning has its roots in adult education and learning theories *(Brookfield, 2009; Kiely, 2004, 2005; Mezirow, 1995)*. Mezirow's work demonstrates how among adults, a disorienting dilemma can trigger profound questioning, leading to realignments in worldview, values, and actions. Yet within the engagement literature, these insights have primarily been applied to undergraduates *(Kiely, 2004, 2005)*. Research concerning effects on graduate student researchers or faculty has been rare *(Warner & Esposito, 2009)*, even in recent years *(Sexsmith & Kiely, 2014; Kiely, 2015)*.

Simultaneously, immersive learning and development activists *(Chambers, 2012; Farmer, Gutiérrez, Griffin, & Weiss Block, 2013)* have written of the power of learning *with* as a key component in advancing policy proposals and reimagining unjust structures. Working with the World Bank and other organizations, Chambers *(2012)* wrote,

> The question is not whether the direct experiential learning of immersions and reality checks can be afforded. It is whether anyone in any organisation committed to the MDGs [millennium development goals], social justice and reducing poverty, can justify not affording and making space for them. *("Why Now?" para. 6)*

Connecting transformational learning research and the work of development activists with engaged faculty experiences is important not only because it may help us better understand

individual faculty meaning making, but also because it may bring us key insights for advancing personal, institutional, and structural transformation.

Indeed, surfacing the potential for "the human element" to emerge through relational knowing may help other social scientists see past their indoctrinations in objectivity to embrace the possibility of systematic research coupled with meaningful connection with the sacred lives involved. Hordge-Freeman, for example, shares that during her research in Brazil, she "instinctively aligned… with a black feminist orientation" but quickly found herself taking a photo of a young black girl in a manner that suggested a "white gaze" and "raised questions about my privilege, my positionality, and the tension between being a researcher and an activist" *(p. 124)*. Being a Black North American did not automatically create opportunities for solidarity with Afro-Brazilians, and Hordge-Freeman realized "my propensity to so easily slip into the more problematic researcher gaze reflected my inculcation in the norms of sociology and a particular social-science tradition that includes the casual dismissal and manipulation of marginalized communities" *(p. 125)*.

Although she quickly recognizes her own responsibility to be continuously self-reflective and critical in monitoring how her academic socialization has conditioned her to interact with marginalized communities, Hordge-Freeman also comes to understand the role her privileged position can play within relationships she has developed with respondents during more than a year in Brazil. An ally and friend, Matheus, is "beaten, arrested, and thrown in jail, as a result of racial profiling and police brutality" *(p. 130)*. Hordge-Freeman soon finds herself serving as a translator between the jailed Matheus's wife, an American business partner, and representatives of the Public Ministries. She speaks with "two administrators at the jail, two lawyers, and a civil rights group in Salvador" *(p. 131)*, in addition to writing a letter on Matheus's behalf. She realizes her essential role: "Part of the reason why I was central to this process is because of the assumption about how my Americanness would potentially help his situation" *(p. 131)*. This is not a naïve assumption, nor is it indicative of an inflated sense of self in this story. The catalytic role of outsiders in rights networks, and in particular the way in which connectedness to Northern activists can bring important pressures to bear on repressive regimes, has been amply documented *(Risse, Ropp, & Sikkink, 1999)*. Even in the case of relatively small-scale community–campus partnerships *(Reynolds, 2014)* or international volunteering networks *(Lough & Matthew,*

2014), outsiders' presence and careful advocacy can support local and national advocacy goals and rights diffusion.

The power of transformational learning, as well as the extent to which the authors collected here became willing to put their careers and their lives on the line for the sake of justice, has profound implications for the field of community engagement. One possible concern is that, rather than focusing on transformation, the institutionalization movement has proceeded largely through consideration of faculty incentive structures *(O'Meara & Braskamp, 2005)*, in effect tinkering with the existing system in the hope of getting faculty members "out there and engaged." A second issue relates to the first. If faculty members engage because of small institutional incentives, an institutional mandate, or simply because it is likely to improve their students' learning experiences, are they likely to take the risk of expending the time, effort, and personal bravery necessary to be in relationship with marginalized communities and people? Third, as our country and world become more socioeconomically segregated, are campuses truly engaging with marginalized communities? It is through deep, meaningful relationships with socially distant others—coupled with critical structural analysis—that we grow in understanding of the profound injustices that are part of our existing societies. Fourth, what are the implications if significant time in or with marginalized communities is truly transformative—in a manner that is difficult if not impossible to match through text, analysis, or "safer" forms of engagement? Might there be a discourse and understanding challenge between those who have lived and worked through such experiences and those who have not? And finally, transformational experiences are volatile. People exposed to disorienting dilemmas may grow to reach and advocate for new possibilities, or they may shrink back in fear, seek shelter in stereotypes, and choose not to engage. Are there ways to support faculty and graduate students through their transformational learning experiences?

Learning From and Contributing to the Engaged Learning Movement

The chapter authors and editors identify themselves as Africanists, anthropologists, development scholars, geographers, grassroots activists, and sociologists. Their disciplinary and occupational training rewards focus on whole communities, histories, populations, power, and social structures. They consider structural issues to an extent that is too often overlooked in the engagement literature, and they visit and live in places that most faculty mem-

bers would not take students. Both of these acts are vital in pursuit of justice. Yet these scholars also surface questions that the field of engagement has already begun to address.

With the insightful eye of an outsider-insider, Espinosa identifies unique contributions that may be made by academia because of

> its capacity to protect and encourage critical thinking, to conduct research, and reflect on experience without the urgency and immediacy of activism. This is an important characteristic of the academy that we need to keep in mind as we explore the links between activism and academia. *(p. 54)*

This special location apart from the inescapable urgency and outcomes orientation of our neoliberal world brings to mind Imagining America's support of artists and scholars who stoke the fires of imagination in order to create transformation within higher education and society. Here is one of the many locations in the book where the writers' thinking aligns with efforts under way in community–campus engagement. Espinosa specifically highlights the

> role of imagination in social life as "a positive force that encourages an emancipatory politics of globalization." By expanding the circle of legitimate knowledge to include those outside academia, we should also be redefining the parameters of academic epistemology, the topics we study, and how we do it to better reflect the extreme diversity of perspectives and interests that exist. *(p. 59)*

Espinosa is now an associate professor at Brandeis, but she spent many years as an activist and found that academia following activism was not easy. "You pay a price for being 'out': you lag behind, compared to what your peers have accomplished in the ten years or so that you were 'outside' academia" *(p. 51)*. Several of the authors share these concerns about what constitutes "legitimate research," acceptance within the academy, or strengths specific to higher education's capacities to support creative activism—without any citation of the major engagement associations.

This points to a knowledge mobilization challenge for the community engagement movement within higher education. Insightful

collections of scholarly insights regarding methodically bridging research and activism are available through Campus Compact *(2015)*, Community Campus Partnerships for Health *(2013)*, Imagining America *(2016)*, and the National Collaborative for the Study of University Engagement *(2016)*. Each of these organizations is systematically helpful in addressing many of the challenges named here, yet the authors seem to have experienced their careers without the support of any of these networks.

Considering and Creating More Humane Possibilities

This volume emerged through engaged academics' cooperation with activists who "are looking for partners in their efforts to improve the lives of poor and marginalized communities" *(p. xi)*. Both for applied researchers who wish to better understand their efforts through the insights of earlier social scientists pushing the edge of "legitimate research" and for researchers who aim to engage diverse, potentially decolonizing epistemologies, along with related methods of dissemination, this book is a valuable resource. Perhaps more important, it offers stories of fortitude and hope in which serious social scientists repeatedly opt for humane, community-connected, and justice-serving routes of action over often-easier, career-enhancing options.

If I have any complaint with the book, it is that Section 1 lacks a clear theme and suffers from several of the dangers inherent in the construction of any edited volume. Parts of the section seem rushed, e.g., "While I am not familiar with them, I know there are other collaborative initiatives in areas like health and policy research" *(p. 55)*. Others seem to be included because of academic-celebrity status (Esteva, *pp. 15-30)*, or otherwise indicative of a section looking for a theme. For example, Lewis's interesting chapter on Latin American and Caribbean thinkers of African descent could stand alone as a strong work, but there is a question of fit here. Readers who lack background in Latin American studies or development may find the amount of content from outside the United States challenging, but it is a strength for scholars interested in considering more global perspectives. On the whole, the book presents several profound and meaningful reflections on what it means to be an academic, an activist, and a human being working toward a better tomorrow. A stubbornly hopeful spirit continues to emerge throughout the text, even as it visits and experiences countless instances of blatant, violent oppression.

Escobar explores the relationship between the personal and the collective in activism as history-making. He writes, "The starting point is that the personal also has historical and political dimensions—it is, in short, history-in-person all the way down" *(p. 112)*. Here again, the beauty of imagining—and its central role in activism—comes forward:

> We live at our best when engaged in acts of history-making, meaning by this the ability to engage in the ontological act of disclosing new ways of being, of transforming the ways in which we understand and deal with ourselves and the world. *(p. 117)*

Smith situates her insights powerfully within a reflection on "the fundamental role that the ontological question of the human plays in our ability to marry the theoretical and the practical in our activist research" *(p. 136)*. Historical dehumanization requires us now to engage a deliberate rehumanization and a new understanding of history that helps us "co-identify ourselves with the other" *(p. 136)*.

These are not small ideas. They serve as reminders that the term *transformation* should not be thrown around lightly. To move closer to justice, we must continuously reimagine and re-create our world. We must imagine and understand what it will look like to live in a world where the transcendent dignity of the human person is recognized across all borders, in all communities, despite perceived differences. The activist-scholars collected here have provided us with some insights that should support transformational learning among academics—as part of reconnecting with the clear humanity in marginalized communities and deconstructing the oppressive structures and assumptions in which we find ourselves.

References

Brookfield, S. (2009). The concept of critical reflection: Promises and contradictions. *European Journal of Social Work, 12*(3), 293-304.

Campus Compact. (2015). Engaged scholarship and review, promotion, and tenure. Retrieved from http://compact.org/resource-posts/trucen-section-b/

Chambers, R. (2012, September 6). Why don't all development organizations do immersions? [Web log post]. Retrieved from http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/robert-chambers-why-dont-all-development-organizations-do-immersions/

Community Campus Partnerships for Health. (2013). *Community-based participatory research.* Retrieved from http://depts.washington.edu/ccph/commbas.html

Farmer, P., Gutiérrez, G., Griffin, M., and Weiss Block, J. (2013). *In the company of the poor: Conversations with Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Imagining America. (2016). Tenure & promotion. Retrieved from http://imaginingamerica.org/initiatives/tenure-promotion/

Kiely, R. (2004). A chameleon with a complex: Searching for transformation in international service-learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 10*(2), 5-20.

Kiely, R. (2005). A transformative learning model for service-learning: A longitudinal case study. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 12*(1), 5-22.

Kiely, R. (2015, September). *Navigating professional and ethical challenges: A qualitative investigation of faculty experiences in global service-learning.* Paper presented at the Annual Engaged Scholarship Consortium, State College, PA.

Lough, B. J., & Matthew, L. E. (2014). *International volunteering and governance.* United Nations Volunteers Programme and the International Forum for Volunteering in Development. Retrieved from http://forum-ids.org/2014/10/unv-forum-paper#discussion_paper

Mezirow, J. (1995). Transformation theory of adult learning. In M. Welton (Ed.), *In defense of the lifeworld: Critical perspectives on adult learning* (pp. 39-70). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

National Collaborative for the Study of University Engagement. (2016). Reappointment, promotion, and tenure. Retrieved from http://ncsue.msu.edu/publications/reappointment.aspx

O'Meara, K., & Braskamp, L. (2005). Aligning faculty reward systems and development to promote faculty and student growth. *National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) Journal, 42*(2), 223-240.

Reynolds, N. (2014). What counts as outcomes? Community perspectives of an engineering partnership. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 20*(1), 79-90.

Risse, T., Ropp, S., & Sikkink, K. (1999). *The power of human rights: International norms and domestic change.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Sexsmith, K., & Kiely, R. (2014, October 30). *Faculty experiences in global service-learning: A qualitative study.* Paper presented at the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement conference, New Orleans, LA.

Warner, B., & Esposito, J. (2009). What's not in the syllabus: Faculty transformation, role modeling and role conflict in immersion service-learning courses. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 20*(3), 510-517.

About the Reviewer

Eric Hartman is executive director of the Center for Peace and Global Citizenship at Haverford College and cofounder of globalsl.org. Hartman has published and presented broadly on global citizenship, community-engaged learning, and ethics in global community-campus partnerships. He holds a Ph.D. in public and international affairs from the University of Pittsburgh.