

**Cann, C. N., & DeMeulenaere, E. J. (2020). *The activist academic: Engaged scholarship for resistance, hope, and social change*. Myers Education Press. 250 pp.**

Review by Marisol Morales



**A**s I cozy up in my bed and put myself in the perfect position of comfort and focus, I open up the book *The Activist Academic: Engaged Scholarship for Resistance, Hope, and Social Change* by Colette N. Cann and Eric J. DeMeulenaere. I possessed some background on the book and the authors since I interviewed them for a Campus Compact podcast when the book was first released in 2020 (Seligsohn et al., 2020). The conversation from the podcast was inspiring, and I very much appreciated the way they framed their work, but I expected to open this book and find the same academic ease that so much of our field produces. What I uncovered as I read through the prologue was something different and unlike other engagement-focused articles or books I have read. Their conversations, their deliberations, their families, and their realities made their way to the pages. At first, I was a bit confused, but in a good way. The casual approach drew me in and made me want to understand their process and how this duo arrived at this space of depth and reflection.

Cann and DeMeulenaere introduce themselves in their first year as “activist academics” with the ever-looming tenure process ahead of them. For them, the identity belongs to academics who seek to find ways for their research, teaching, and service to promote justice and equity inside and outside higher education. The authors shared stories of their educational journeys, their work in public education before entering academia, and the practicalities of their choices to be academics or work at their institutions. The 10 years of field data from their experiences are captured in the pages. Understanding why they entered academia and the rules of engagement for tenure created a tension they were trying to make meaning of in this book. They hope to remain true to their activist identities while knowing the importance of challenging hegemony and creating different tools

in this space. It reminded me of the many conversations I have had with junior faculty and the pressure they feel to conform to rules that are built on what Cann (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2020) called the “three-headed monster that plagues US institutions”: institutional racism, White privilege, and White supremacy (p. 4).

Activist academics want to do more than just survive in academia. They are about engagement, the practical use of academic tools for social change, and personal examples conveyed through narratives to challenge the traditional use of research, teaching, and service in order to challenge injustices. This work, like the many stories I have heard over the course of my career from junior faculty, is deeply personal. It can feel lonely if you do not have others who understand the pressure to conform that many of our senior colleagues and institutions place on those seeking tenure. *The Activist Academic* contributes a great deal to the body of literature that seeks to redefine academia so that it can be more accepting of activist academics, move beyond its hills and ivory tower, and stand side by side with communities in their social justice aims.

The authors’ use of critical coconstructed autoethnography, along with the understanding that their friendship played an important role in their data collection and writing process, allows for the emergence of a beautiful narrative that makes the reader feel as though they are part of it. Reading the back-and-forth banter as ideas are exchanged, agreements are made, different points of view are shared, and the struggle toward understanding is achieved created an inviting process that welcomes the reader into the fold.

Chapter 2, “Capturing Praxis—Critical Co-Constructed Autoethnography,” lays out how the authors selected the methodology they use as they were proceeding with the question they wanted to explore. Most

important to the authors was landing on a shared methodology that could hold all that they were trying to communicate. Their use of the end notes as a space to provide context and understanding of the various critical pedagogies that undergird their work is particularly valuable. This is a luscious place to delve into the literature and learn about the body of work that informs their methodology.

As the progression of their book moves into Year 3 of Cann's and DeMeulenaere's academic activist journey, they tackle the critical pedagogies that they are introducing future teachers to in their classrooms. The reflection on their "whys"—why they love critical theory, why they include it in their courses, and why they believe it is necessary—becomes a powerful introduction to the history and development of critical theory. They discuss the roots and origins of critical theory, voices included and voices often overlooked, as well as critiques of critical theory, such as where it falls short on the inclusion of intersectionality. As a reader, you imagine yourself in the café with them thinking about the first time you were introduced to critical theory: what it did for you, and how it made you understand yourself and your agency. The use of narrative invites you in as a participant in much the same way that a good novel does.

Chapter 4, Year 4 of their journey, turns to activist research. What I appreciate about the framing of this chapter is that it is grounded in the impact of activist research. Still, the authors begin by trying to define activist research and put parameters around it. At a basic level, activist research is seen as research that critically theorizes and creates material change. This kind of research is rooted in critical theory, critical pedagogy, and critical race theory; focused on social justice; and "committed to bringing about change at the spaces and sites of research" (p. 71). Cann and DeMeulenaere identify three dimensions of impact: ideological, material, and scale. The ideological dimension of impact is concerned with the degree to which the research is counterhegemonic and disrupts dominant narratives. The second dimension, material, is focused on the degree to which structural change and/or improvement occurs for participants. The final dimension, scale, reflects the number of people affected by the research.

The authors map these impacts on a graph, in which the *x* axis is ideological impact

and the *y* axis is material impact, and scale is represented by the size of circles on the graph (p. 78). Although Cann and DeMeulenaere acknowledge that their graph is not a precise measurement tool, they offer it as a useful reflection device to assess intent from impact and to focus on continuous improvement for social change. I found the prospect of this three-dimensional framework exciting when I began to read the chapter, but questions arose for me about a fourth dimension: timing. Often, we cannot see the impact of our projects in real time. Is impact measured by the duration within which the project happens, typically confined by academic calendars and not by community timelines? Do we have to wait to call a project "activist research" until after we are able to assess these three dimensions of impact? Is it the researcher who should assign that label to their research or the community or is it codetermined? I see the usefulness of a visual tool like this for plotting and assessment, but I wonder if the graph should be accompanied by a set of reflection questions for activist academics to consider as they cocreate projects in partnership with communities.

As the authors turn to their 5th year on the path as activist academics, they embark on conversations about activist pedagogies, those concerned with liberation and freedom. It is the imagination of the possible in the present. It serves as the "being about it" stance that activist academics must remain in to perform the emancipatory work.

Chapter 5 offers an important contribution by providing substantive information about activist pedagogies, particularly the way critical pedagogies help us to understand schools or schooling as spaces that reproduce inequities. The process by which they discuss the way they introduce students to these pedagogies and theories is not only one of logical progression in how these pedagogies inform, support, or expand on each other; it is also a solid introduction for readers who are new to critical pedagogies. In this chapter, I was introduced to Red and killjoy pedagogies. The authors' narrative also offers us the opportunity to witness them teaching each other about these critical pedagogies. The colearning portrayed in this book is generative. The authors ask questions about what this pedagogy looks like when it is performed and modeled in the classroom, showing the reader how important these questions are for educa-

tors. Those of us who believe in and teach critical pedagogies have to be aware of and cognizant about how we live them in a classroom. It seems hypocritical to teach those theories in a way that supports and upholds the banking method of education. Fortunately, the authors offer a way to think about activist pedagogy as “a pedagogy that is anti-oppressive in *four* dimensions in the classroom. It’s concerned with:

- Purpose: How is justice prioritized?
- Content: How is content shaped by the identities of those in the classroom through issues of identity-based justice?
- Identity: How is identity considered and navigated in classroom spaces?
- Process: How do students and teachers interact in interpersonal space in ways that do not mimic oppressive relationships in society outside the classroom?” (p. 97)

The remainder of the chapter goes in depth on these important questions, which are critical for educators to explore not only when teaching about critical pedagogies but also in their own practice. I highlight the ones above because they are essential for us to hold close in our own practice. However, I was concerned about the way the “process” dimension was treated in Chapter 6, which covers the role of activist service in schools and the community. I question whether the process was handled with integrity in the engagement experience that DeMeulenaere described with his college students, most of whom were White, as they were engaging with high school students of color. All of us who facilitate these sometimes-difficult cross-cultural exchanges have those cringe moments where we witness the way identity-based power dynamics diminish the voice and experience of young people of color. Here, DeMeulenaere offers it as an example of the challenge of identity work. As I read the process, I struggled with whether DeMeulenaere adequately protected those voices while acknowledging his desire to allow the tension to rise among the students so that authentic dialogue and learning could take place on both sides.

Cann offers the idea of creating “discordant communities,” which involves “creating a community of trust where conflicts are welcomed, coaxed even, and where that conflict can be processed in ways that are produc-

tive, creative, and generative” (pp. 130–131). What Cann describes is not an easy task. It weighs on the educator and is shaped by the identities they have and the different spaces they occupy. Healing and liberation cannot come without awareness, acknowledgment, and the courage to confront the difficult. But this idea is precisely what the activist academic offers to our teaching spaces.

In the final chapter, we are made privy to the prize of tenure having been awarded to the authors and their friends, while they analyze the joy and conflict of that accomplishment around a campfire. The introduction of the undercommons by Moten and Harney (2013) provides a space of acknowledgment of this conflict. They confront the “common” academic trajectory that demands recognition for work, such as the pursuit of tenure, which requires participating in the reproductive aspects of professionalization that reinforce capitalism and other forms of oppression in institutions. The only alternative for those of historically marginalized identities is to be part of the undercommons, a place for collective study where academics are “in but not of” the academy. This space of resistance for activist academics is one that is “liberated from the capitalist commodification of ideas” (p. 143) and challenges the status quo. The conversation that ensues among the academics around the campfire ranges from abolition to fugitivity to transforming from the inside out. It highlights the labor exploitation that happens in higher education and the importance of creating spaces of refuge.

This chapter underscores the importance of cultivating relationships to create restorative spaces of inspiration and support among activist academics who perform this critical work at institutions and push up against increasing political and economic pressures. The afterword, by John Saltmarsh, offers a powerful call, directive, or indictment in the form of a letter to a departmental personnel review committee chair that challenges the archaic institutional culture and standard epistemology that so many tenure and promotion processes utilize to assess achievement. In this piece, he beautifully questions whether the standards and institutional cultures that reinforce power, privilege, and oppression are ones that can adequately assess activist scholarship. It is a profound reinforcement to the authority of the book.

*The Activist Academic* deftly explores the personal and connected process of doing work that most aligns with the values and identity of an activist academic. The authors accomplish this by inviting readers to witness their journey navigating the current limits for achieving tenure to move toward creating a space within academia or from the undercommons that feels most authentic to them and aligns with their purpose. The book offers readers exposure to relevant, critical pedagogies and theories, insight into practice, and a lens into the ways those who seek to impact social justice find spaces of liberation within and outside the restrictive system of higher education in America.



### **About the Reviewer**

*Marisol Morales is the executive director of the Carnegie Elective Classifications at the American Council on Education. Her research interests focus on the community engagement experiences of Latinx students at Hispanic-Serving Institutions; equity, leadership, and community engagement; and social and political movements in Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican diaspora. She received her EdD in organizational leadership from the University of La Verne.*

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