Emergent approaches to diversity and social justice in higher education

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Introduction to the Emergent Approaches to Diversity and Social Justice in Higher Education Special Issue

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Introduction to the Emergent Approaches to Diversity and Social Justice in Higher Education Special Issue

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“But everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.”
—James Baldwin (as cited in Tatum, 1999, p. xix)

As we reviewed the submissions we received for this special issue and provided feedback to authors encouraging them to explicitly situate themselves within their work in order to implicate themselves and allow readers to more fully engage with the material, we reflected deeply on what had brought us to this work on social justice in higher education. After all, to critically engage with social justice scholarship and practice is not at the top of the list when it comes to advice for new faculty members on how to be successful in higher education today (Alexander, 2005; Jackson & Jordan, 1999; Nocella, Best, & McLaren, 2010; Schmidt, 2000). Yet for the three of us, between three to seven years post-doctoral dissertation completion, social justice has been and continues to be our primary area of scholarship. As scholarship that is not viewed as being directly tied to advancing a market-driven academic agenda, we believe this work is of great import at this particular time in history, when many progressive gains made over centuries of struggles for a more equitable society are being scaled back.

What then is it about us and about our journeys in life that bring us to this work and to these convictions? As we broach this subject over lunch in Ames, Iowa, at the Café, a local restaurant with French-inspired décor and an ever-changing European-Asian-American fusion menu based on produce from local farmers, Lori shares what growing up in East St. Louis means for her work today. She describes how Jonathan Kozol’s (1991) depiction of East St. Louis in the education classic, *Savage Inequalities*, means that when she tells people where she is from, the response she gets is one of disbelief. A Ph.D. raised in the “ravages” of East St. Louis? Impossible! As we enjoy chicken lettuce wraps in a dimly lit booth, while Cat Stevens is playing softly throughout
the restaurant, Lori goes on to describe how growing up in East St. Louis is what gave birth to the social justice lens she brings to her work today:

Of course, growing up, this is not what I would have called it; I just knew that some things were not right. I knew that there was something wrong with the fact that at one point we had no regular trash collection, that our schools were unsanitary, that our teachers were frequently on strike, and that we were known in some media outlets as the “murder capital of the United States.” I remember adults talking about these things and about how local and state governments were not doing anything about the situation.

That sense of knowing as children that something is not right but not having access to the language and analysis that we have as adults today seems to be a theme throughout our conversation. Riyad, born to a middle-class, Bangladeshi family in England, raised in Kuwait, and educated in Canada, describes how privileges afforded him (because of his British citizenship) and denied to members of his own family (due to the lack thereof) heightened his awareness of difference. Growing up, he clearly remembers how due to his British passport he could navigate the world with little trouble, while members of his family would have to line up at visa offices or get harassed with questions at national borders due to their “Third World” citizenship. At the same time, Riyad speaks of always being reminded that he is “different”:

While my British and now also Canadian citizenship affords me privileges that many in my family do not have, as a South Asian Muslim, I am constantly reminded that I come from a “kind” that is considered miskin [impoverished] in Arabic, that I am at once a “Paki” and “model minority” in England and North America, or that my people are violent suicide bombers and misogynists.

Riyad acknowledges that these tensions have been a part of the only life that he has known and fuel his passion for social justice work. These tensions that Riyad describes strike a cord with Nana:

Growing up the daughter of a Ghanaian father and a Swedish mother, I never realized I was different until I tried to make sense of children in Ghana teasing me for being white, broni [white man], while children in Sweden teased me for being black, neger [negro]. I will never forget being nine years old and pondering the irony that I, as one person, could be considered white in one setting, while viewed as black in another. Although I did not have the language to express it at the time, I know now that I was trying to make sense of when Stuart Hall (Jhally, 1997) describes race as a “floating signifier,” suggesting that the construction of race shifts with context, history, and the fluidity of relations of difference.

Engaging with issues of social justice, has always been a part of her life.

So how did we get from these initial experiences to the work we do today? As he gazes across the restaurant at the all-white clientele, Riyad describes how his studies in both health sciences and the social sciences led him to the question of equity and knowledge production and a quest to understand how the knowledge validation process impacts the material experiences of minoritized bodies along the lines of race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, and language. Meanwhile, he views his life experiences and intersecting identities as a South Asian, Canadian, heterosexual, able-bodied male as informing his thinking on questions of social justice from the perspective of interlocking systems of oppression. Reflecting on his current work and describing a course he is currently teaching, Riyad suggests that many of his students, even though they are committed to doing social justice work in higher education, are resistant to understanding the complexity of this work. “This makes me question how much other bodies who are working or researching
higher education really know about social justice theory,” he says. He goes on to suggest that in his experience, higher education students and scholars are rarely exposed to different types of social justice theories, stemming, for example, from feminist studies, sociology, history, disability studies, critical pedagogy, postcolonial studies, globalization, and ethnic studies.

As we decide whether or not we have time for dessert before our next meeting on campus, we are reminded by Riyad’s comments of how few scholars on whom we draw in our own work are situated within the study of higher education. Lori describes herself as a higher education scholar highly influenced by African American studies, women’s studies, sociology, and critical race theory (CRT), while Nana identifies as a transdisciplinary scholar working at the margins of the study of higher education. Pulling out a copy of a book chapter by Meenakshi Durham and Douglas Kellner (2001) from her bag, Nana speaks of transdisciplinary scholarship as challenging existing discipline-oriented boundaries, combining multiple forms of theory, analysis, and critique to gain new insights. Remembering back to her days as a graduate student, she describes how discovering the works of scholars, like Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Chandra Mohanty, and Antonia Darder, opened up a whole new world to her. Rather than simply being viewed as seeing things very differently from other students, which had often been the case, she was challenged to deepen and complicate her views. As the waitress refills our water glasses for the third or fourth time, probably wondering if we are going to leave soon, Nana talks about the ways in which she views her work in relation to the core of the study of higher education. “In an effort to shape new conversations, I work to bring alternative, complementary, and challenging perspectives to bear on dominant discourse, as I believe it is impossible to fully engage and solve the large macro-level issues that face higher education through engaging with knowledge only from a singular discipline or field of study,” she notes. For Lori, while the pieces that had played a part in what she had experienced in East St. Louis, from racism to classism to many other systemic structures that contributed to the savage inequalities Kozol (1991) described, began to become clear during college, it was when she encountered critical race theory (CRT) as a graduate student that things fell into place. “It was through CRT that I could fully engage the dominance of white supremacy and its prevalence in legal, educational, and social systems. CRT was a framework through which I could name racism as a systemic force that ensured the prominence of deficit discourses about minoritized populations in education.” Such perspectives guide her work as she studies the experiences of minoritized college students, as well as racial injustice in the academy.

As we wait for the bill and organize all the submissions we started reviewing at the beginning of our meal into piles of “accept,” “revise and resubmit,” and “reject,” with our own journeys fresh in our minds, we are reminded of our hopes for this special issue; that it will push the boundaries of scholarship in the field of higher education to reimagine, rethink, and work toward equity and social justice in higher education and broader society, and that as the field grows that we, too, may grow and develop through this work. We are also reminded that while engaging in this type of work we cannot forget how we stand on the shoulders of many who have come before us. We are keenly aware of the unearned material and social privileges we have as scholars that allow and afford us to eat at a café in the afternoon to do our work, while other people labor (e.g., waiters, cooks, farmers, and so on) and nourish us for our discussion. In short, we acknowledge that this special issue is the fruit of many people’s labor that extends beyond scholars, students, and higher education institutions—“invisible” labor that needs to be acknowledged and considered as we continue to engage in social justice education scholarship.
In this special issue of *Equity and Excellence in Education*, we highlight the work of scholars whose research illustrates emergent approaches to social justice in higher education. For years, social justice research in education has been centered on P-12 issues and, while such research is clearly important and relevant, the focus on higher education as a social organization has failed to fully grapple with issues of social justice comprehensively; therefore, a major purpose of this special issue is to call attention to the need for higher education scholars, faculty, administrators, students, and staff to (re)envision the possibilities of higher education research and praxis viewed through a social justice lens. What we ultimately hope is that this issue will serve as a call to action in the study of higher education; a call not only to push the boundaries of knowledge but also to encourage those in higher education (ourselves included) to think more deeply about the ideas, language (e.g., social justice, equity, fairness, access, etc.) and patterns of thought that are often taken for granted in higher education contexts.

**RE/CONCEPTUALIZING CONCEPTS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Social justice has become a buzzword in higher education. But what does this phrase mean or refer to? In this section we share some concepts related to social justice as a means of framing and understanding the complexity of working towards justice in a pluralistic society that is power laden. Our central purpose is not to produce a definitive conceptualization of social justice and its associated theories, but rather to begin a preliminary map of the landscape in order to initiate a productive debate that might usefully inform the work of the higher education community (Gewirtz, 1998; North, 2006).

**Re/conceptualizing Social Justice: Moving Beyond Distribution**

Iris Young (1990) contends that the term social justice has been conflated with the idea of distributive justice. This is a dimension of justice that draws on the classical work of John Rawls (1971) and exclusively focuses on the way in which goods, services, and burdens are properly distributed among members of society. Such a paradigm focuses on the distribution of material goods, such as resources, income, wealth, or social positions. It also considers questions of equality of opportunity, outcomes, access, participation, and the distribution of cultural and social capital (Gewirtz, 1998, 2006). According to Young (1990) and Sharon Gewirtz (1998), such a conception of justice overlooks the social structures and institutional contexts that often determine the distributive patterns of resources. Furthermore, although we can begin considering the distributive issues with regard to nonmaterial goods (such as power, opportunity, or self-respect), an inherent problem continues as this form of theorizing renders these nonmaterial social goods as static things, rather than as symbols of social relations and processes. In the higher education context, we can fall into the trap of equating social justice with distributive justice by exclusively focusing on distribution questions—numerical representation of minoritized bodies among faculty, students, and administrators in universities/community colleges, college access, voice in the classroom, curricula, and so on—and ignore the social structures, processes, and institutional contexts that produce these distributions in the first place. Young argues social justice requires
us to dismantle these structures of oppression, and to consider non-distributive dimensions of justice, such as decision-making structures and procedures, division of labor, and culture.

To effectively understand and work toward social justice in higher education, we need to understand and evaluate the institutional processes, the patterns of distribution, social relations, and cultural/societal norms (Fraser, 1997; Gewirtz, 1998, 2006; Young, 1990) within the higher education system. This is where the concepts of relational justice and recognitional justice are important to keep in mind. Relational justice examines the “nature of the relationships which structure society” and “the formal and informal rules which govern how members of society treat each other both on a macro level and at a micro interpersonal level” (Gewirtz, 1998, p. 471). It concentrates on practices and procedures that inform the organization of larger social institutions and one-on-one social relationships. Interconnected with relational justice, recognitional justice is associated with the absence of cultural imperialism and refers to the nonexistence of cultural domination, non/mis-recognition, and disrespect inflicted on a social group (Fraser, 1997; Gewirtz, 2006). This latter form of justice focuses on social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication (Fraser, 1997) (for instance, marginalizing and making invisible curricula knowledge or culturally responsive pedagogy that are derived from Native American experiences).

Most critical theorists argue that we need a combination of these theories of justice to engage in social justice work. For instance, Nancy Fraser argues that we need to interconnect the politics of redistribution with the politics of recognition in social justice work and understand the process by which both “economic advantage impedes equal participation in the making of culture, in public spheres and in every day life” and the “cultural norms that are unfairly biased against some are institutionalized in the state and the economy” (Fraser, cited in North, 2006, p. 508). By integrating the ideas of distributive and relational justice and foregrounding the politics of difference, Young (1990) argues that social justice means freedom from oppressive relations (i.e., constraints on self-development) and domination (i.e., constraints on self-determination). To this end, Young provides a useful framework to understand oppression as she discusses the five faces of oppression inflicted on minoritized bodies: violence, powerlessness, marginalization, exploitation, and cultural imperialism. Connie North (2006) further recognizes other tensions in social justice theory beyond the distributive-recognitional dualism, such as the “differential emphases on equality as difference and equality as sameness,” and the tension between “varying attention to macro level processes” (such as policymaking and social movement organizing) and “micro level processes” (such as individual behaviors and daily social interactions) (p. 508). However, Gewirtz (2006) cautions and reminds us that “in practice, pursuing certain dimensions of social justice will inevitably mean neglecting, or sacrificing, others” (p. 70). To sum up, social justice in higher education requires a multi-faceted, holistic, and contextual approach to understanding the concept of social justice in a broader sense.

Equality versus Equity

Often associated with social justice in higher education discourse (particularly tied to distributive justice) are the ideas of equality and equity that are sometimes used interchangeably. In this section we will very briefly tease out the differences between these two terms as they distinctively relate to the distribution of goods and services. Equality refers to the equal distribution of goods
and services to different groups. However, this ignores the systemic and historical forms of exclusion that operate within society. Equity shifts the debate “from equal treatment to that of access and removal of barriers for historically disadvantaged groups” (Ng, 2003, p. 19). Unlike equality, equity is not about providing equal resources to different groups in exactly the same way. Instead, it is about providing the right amount of resources that a certain group needs to live a full life, given the historical, material, and social marginalization they have experienced (Zine, 2001). For instance, equality is like going to a playground full of barefoot children and offering them the same size shoes. Equity, on the other hand, operates from the premise that the barefoot children will be given different shoes that will fit their feet (W. R. Blumenfeld, personal communication, October 16, 2008).

Within an equity framework, we need to move beyond “equality of difference” and understand that forms of social difference should not be likened, but instead require different and disproportionate necessities. In other words, oppression does not homogenize groups of marginalized people, but instead “there are significant distinctions between oppressed groups that require different . . . responses” (Zine, 2001, p. 250). Furthermore, educational equity is a “check on the justice of certain actions” that are carried out and the arrangements that result from those actions (Secada, cited in Zine, 2001, p. 252). In contrast, equality is based on the premise that there are differences among groups along “some agreed upon index” (Zine, 2001, p. 252), for instance, issues of equality of access and opportunity to obtain certain material goods or equality in terms of treatment by educators. Within an equity framework, we need to live with the complexity that there are no agreed upon standards by which we can judge what an individual or group deserves. In short, from an equity framework, social justice is not a fixed target, but one that is floating, depending on context, social groups, and systems of oppression (C. Cortez, personal communication, November 10, 2008).

Intersectionality, Interlocking Systems of Oppression, and Saliency

When our naming of the world has a singular focus on certain forms of oppression in a world that is very complex and extends beyond binaries, the resulting conclusions, recommendations, and change strategies are incomplete (Collins, 2004; Mary Fellows & Sherene Razack, 1998; Weber, 2001). This is where the concepts of intersectionality, interlocking systems of oppression, and saliency become relevant in social justice. Intersectionality refers to the idea that people have multiple identities and that people experience and perform/live within multiple, intersecting, and concurrent positions of privileges and oppressions. Usually the image is of being at the crossroads where multiple forms of oppression and identity markers converge (K. Everett, personal communication, September 18, 2008). Intersectionality operates at the individual/micro level, with the idea that race, gender, and class hierarchies complicate each other and interconnect in certain local contexts (Dei, 2007; Weber, 2001). Interlocking systems of oppression, on the other hand, refer to how systems of oppression and domination not only interconnect, but mutually produce and perpetuate each other (Collins, 2004; Fellows & Razack, 1998). For instance, whiteness sustains and produces patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, heterosexism, and Christian privilege (see Fellows & Razack, 1998; A. Smith, 2005). These systems of oppression cannot be separated from each other, and theoretically they operate mutually with each other. They simultaneously reinforce and construct positions of dominance and subordination. In terms of social justice
work, Mary Fellows and Sherene Razack caution us by stating, “We fail to realize that we cannot undo our own marginality without simultaneously undoing all systems of oppression” (p. 14). Intersectionality and interlocking systems of oppression also differ in terms of political practice (Dei, 2007). An intersectional approach is a useful framework for analyzing cases of discrimination and contextualizing them in legal, economic, and political arenas. On the other hand, an interlocking approach is a political and transformative framework that highlights how subject positions are possessed by dominant power and produced through a process that leads to the disempowerment of the subordinated (Dei, 2007). In short, an interlocking approach highlights the intimate connections among systems of oppression, the relational connections between the privileged and oppressed, and the transformative dimensions of social change that require critical self-reflexivity.

Saliency is about recognizing that within a certain context, a certain form of oppression is readily visible, and that this form of oppression could be an entry point to strategically and politically engage with domination and oppression, while recognizing that there are invisible markers of difference that simultaneously operate in the background that structure, produce, and reinforce this earlier form of oppression. Saliency is also about how people’s personal histories and experiences may position them to articulate the centrality of a particular oppression within certain contexts (Dei, 2007). But we should not romanticize the theoretical project of interlocking systems of oppressions, as it does “not easily translate into ready made political alliances among oppressed groups in society” (Zine, 2001, p. 254). These concepts of understanding the interconnections between multiple forms of oppressions, as well as how to work against and/or transform them, help us navigate working toward social justice in higher education.

Re/conceptualizing Diversity

Within higher education, “through what lenses and voices should diversity be responded to?” (Mayuzumi, Motobyashi, Nagayama, & Takeuchi, 2007, p. 590). Like its counterpart social justice, “diversity” has also become a buzzword in higher education. How can we conceptualize diversity in a way in which difference “envisions possibilities, both practical and theoretical, of what it means to have a society that is difference-centred?” (Moosa-Mitha, 2005, p. 63). Many critical scholars have problematized the concepts and projects of diversity and difference that take place within higher education. First, “diversity” projects have been critiqued for being complicit with “managing” and “tolerating” difference, rather than centering diversity in higher education for social change (Hu-DeHart, 2000). For instance, diversity is evoked by higher education policymakers to tap into “under-exploited pools of talent to increase national and local economic productivity/competitiveness” (Archer, 2007, p. 643). Second, concepts of difference are associated with phenotypical difference that reify and essentialize difference (Archer, 2007; Baez, 2004). In other words, “it treats social identities as essentialized, static, and clearly bounded phenomena, rather than recognizing them as complex, shifting and contested interlinking indices” (Archer, 2007, p. 643). Third, critical scholars question the study of “difference” because it begs the question, “different in relation to whom or what?” (Baez, 2004; Bannerji, 1991). To this end, postcolonial theorists argue that the construction and study of difference has been historically associated with the construction of the Other for the purposes of commodifying, exploiting, and managing these Others (Said, 1978). In short, Kimine Mayuzumi et al. (2007) argue,
The notion of “difference” needs to be examined within the power dynamic of higher education context and larger society; otherwise, “accepting difference” for “a sense of oneness in a diverse community”... can impose the norms established by the dominant groups onto minority groups who are not positioned within the norm. (p. 582)

This conceptualization of social justice was what we kept in mind as we pulled together this eclectic set of research from a wide range of perspectives.

In summary, we encourage readers to further explore these concepts of social justice and its associated theories, in order to initiate a productive debate that might usefully inform our everyday practices bringing about social justice education in higher education scholarship and practice.

INTERCONNECTED QUESTIONS, THEMES, AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

As we reviewed the articles contained in this special issue, we noted important cross-cutting questions that engage social justice research from multiple perspectives. To this end, this special issue begins/continues to explore the following questions: What may social justice education look like in higher education institutions? Who are the different constituents bringing about social justice in higher education, and how are they/we implicated in oppression and domination similarly/differently? What are the different theoretical frames/lenses through which we can understand, envision, and enact social justice in higher education? How do we move beyond binary thinking and examine the nuances and complexities of interlocking systems of oppression that are experienced on university campuses? How do micro and macro levels of structures of oppression converge and diverge in the everyday realities of students, faculty, staff, and administrators in higher education institutions? How are questions of institutional governance, program development, student learning, student services, and pedagogy, implicated in enacting social justice in higher education institutions? What constitutes valid knowledge in higher education institutions, and how is this determined? What are the societal assumptions underlying the purpose of higher education, and who belongs in institutions of postsecondary education?

The articles in this special issue consider answers to the above questions by examining a variety of important themes that engage social justice research in higher education from multiple perspectives. For example, institutional issues related to social justice are evident throughout the articles. Moreover, the articles represent a variety of lenses and theoretical perspectives to understand the nuances and complexities of engaging social justice in higher education. Some articles, in particular, draw on multiple theoretical paradigms to distill the intricacies of the way oppression and domination operate in everyday encounters within higher education. The articles also examine issues regarding how social justice might be situated in the experiences of students and faculty. In this section we highlight how we viewed the respective authors’ work in grappling with these emergent themes.

Institutional Issues

In “Revisiting College Predisposition: Integrating Sociological and Psychological Perspectives on Inequality,” Johanna Massé, Rosemary Perez, and Julie Posselt investigate how the role of an

Theoretical Perspectives

Holly Pearson’s “Complicating Intersectionality Through the Identities of a Hard of Hearing Korean Adoptee: An Autoethnography” draws on a combination of theories derived from disability studies, intersectionality, and social justice theory to argue the need to move beyond and further complicate race, class, and gender analyses in order to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the intricacies of oppression within higher education from the standpoint of a Korean adoptee with a disability. Similarly, Mitchell et al. combine Henri Lefebvre’s critical geography, Foucauldian discourse analysis, and critical race theory to complicate and theorize a specific advising session between a black advisor and a black student.

Some authors apply the ideas of a particular theorist who is rarely discussed in the study of social justice in higher education. To this end, Massé et al. attempt to interconnect the psychological discourses of stereotype threat with the sociological frameworks of habitus from Pierre Bourdieu (often seen as parallel and not related), to critically examine the question of college access. In an era of neoliberal higher education, Schoorman and Acker-Hocevar and Osei-Kofi et al. utilize critical theoretical perspectives to link the question of the political economy with the micro interactions among faculty in relation to social justice-oriented organizational governance and program development.

Student Experiences

In “Teaching and Learning Social Justice as an ‘Intellectual Community’ Requirement: Pedagogical Opportunities and Student Understandings,” Rey Fuentes, Lara Chanthonghtip, and Francisco Rios address the use of social justice as a framework and pedagogical tool in collegiate classroom settings. Their work highlights the importance of preparing college students, particularly in their first year, to understand and recognize the relevance of social justice to their lives within and beyond institutional settings. Moreover, this article positions the college classroom as a central location for learning about social justice.

Connie North’s “Threading Stitches to Approach Gender Identity, Sexual Identity, and Difference” represents how literature can be used to facilitate greater learning among college students about issues of sexual identities and how such identities intersect with class and gender. Pearson’s autoethnographic reflections on the intersectionality of identities remind scholars and educators...
of the power of narrative and the need to allow students the space to engage in critical self-
examination and awareness. Such reflexive praxis can help students not only understand but also
deconstruct interlocking systems of oppression while recognizing the complexities of multiple
identities. In addition, North’s and Pearson’s articles move beyond the additive discourses sur-
rounding identity and draw attention to how intersectionality unfolds in nuanced ways and in
particular contexts.

Massé et al.’s “Revisiting College Predisposition” provides a different perspective for under-
standing the college choice process. They suggest that, when viewed through a critical lens, the
college choice process is latent with inequities that can disproportionately affect black and Latino
college students. Mitchell et al.’s consideration of race and space reveal the importance of creating
institutional environments that are conducive to positive student experiences. More importantly,
they rethink academic advising within a larger context to unveil the subtle and not so subtle ways
that one black student experienced this process.

Faculty Experiences/Pedagogy

Fuentes et al. demonstrate that faculty and students can successfully collaborate in the co-
construction of knowledge in the research process. Given the authors’ own positionalities, they
reveal the value of engaging undergraduate students in scholarly endeavors toward social justice.
In North’s “Threading Stitches,” pedagogy moves beyond simply teaching students about social
justice toward a framework of faculty engaging in learning with students. Her work encourages
faculty to co-implicate themselves in their teaching and to take responsibility for the extent to
which their teaching may reinscribe oppressive thinking in the classroom. Osei-Kofi et al. explain
the opportunities and challenges embedded in implementing a social justice concentration in a
higher education program. Their work describes the inherent contradictions that faculty face in
creating intellectual spaces for social justice that challenge the very structures in which such spaces
exist, as well as the precarious position in which minoritized faculty are placed when engaged
in social justice efforts. Schoorman and Acker-Hocevar examine what faculty governance might
entail if the process itself were rooted in social justice. They encourage faculty not simply to
view social justice as a course topic, but as a lens through which they approach their academic
commitments while promoting democratic values and ideals.

In short, the articles in this special issue offer a creative combination of ideas and underutilized
theoretical perspectives in the study of higher education to rethink the way we conceptualize
and understand social justice in higher education. To be sure, what the special issue presents
is hardly exhaustive. This special issue fails to consider pertinent issues, such as questions
around globalization of higher education, the role of transnational capital, religious diversity, and
environmental justice that continue to be a growing concern among our university and community
college campuses around the world. In other words, we cannot simply ignore the connections
between enacting social justice in higher education in local contexts and the global flow of bodies,
capital, media, technology, and ideas across borders, nor our relations with the rest of the world.
Such asymmetries of power relations across borders need to be considered as we think within
“glocal” settings.

Furthermore, this special issue overlooks the underclass of academic labor that is present
in post-secondary institutions, but has received very little to no attention in the social justice
education literature in higher education. We would argue that the study of social justice in higher education needs to move beyond a predominant focus on faculty, students, and high-level/mid-level administrators (i.e., academic affairs and student affairs) and engage in what Mari Matsuda (1987) calls “looking to the bottom” or examining social justice through the lenses of those in the least advantageous roles and positions in higher education because they are distinctively situated in ways “to relate theory to the concrete experience of oppression” (p. 325). We should diligently engage in research and praxis that centers the experiences of important players, such as housekeeping service personnel, food services workers, administrative assistants, lab technicians, and other staff personnel whose voices and experiences are often missing from the higher education literature and discourse. This “underclass” of academic labor continues to be largely ignored in higher education scholarship, yet they are increasingly feeling the brunt of neoliberal reform on our campuses, for example, increased surveillance of performance, layoffs, less job security, and reduced benefits.

This special issue also overlooks the question of diversity and social justice in diverse postsecondary institutional settings. In other words, much of the social justice literature is situated in four-year, predominantly white institutions. Yet, much remains to be learned and understood about community colleges, historically black institutions, minority-serving institutions, tribal colleges, virtual universities, and proprietary institutions. Furthermore, the question of indigenous people’s struggles around the globe and how higher education institutions wrestle with such marginalized communities in terms of sitting on their land, exploiting such communities as objects of study, and the contradictory positions held by minoritized communities in white settler nation-states (such as the US, Canada, and Australia) that continue to have settler relationships with people whose land has been stolen (see Grande, 2004; L. Smith, 1999) are very important issues that have not been addressed in this special issue and continue to be ignored in social justice education literature in higher education. Rauna Kuokkanen (2007) eloquently reminds us:

The “indigenous” continues to be unabated in most academic circles. In the same way that indigenous peoples (and their epistemes) remained invisible when the nation-states were being shaped, indigenous scholarships remains invisible and unreflected in most academic discourses, including that of some of the most progressive intellectuals. (p. 156)

Finally, the topics that this special issue does not directly consider are the questions of healing, strategies of hope and survival, and taking care of one’s body when going against the grain. This latter topic is a necessity in this climate of academic restructuring where the questions of emotions, anxiety, and health, are at the forefront of many people’s minds who are involved in studying/working in higher education institutions.

Many more questions, such as the ones mentioned above, need to be raised as educators in postsecondary settings approach social justice work. Such questions should be geared toward generating answers that respond to social justice on both micro and macro levels. Moreover, we encourage scholars to consider what role their research and scholarship will play in transforming higher education as a social entity or field of study. In other words, as a result of these contributions, what will knowledge of higher education look like and what purposes will it serve in both local and global contexts? How does it contribute to reshaping the role that higher education institutions might play in bringing about equity and social justice? How do those within the academic field of higher education make it one where social justice is not simply a curricular issue, but is a philosophy that permeates how faculty, administrators, policymakers, students, and staff engage
in everyday practices? In light of the questions we raise, what we are certain of is that higher education must deliberately move toward advancing a social justice agenda comprised of more theoretical scholarship and data driven research, grounded in social justice that can inform policies, practices, and decisions that influence postsecondary institutions.

As we look to push our thinking and advance social justice in higher education, we must challenge the dominance of microanalysis in the field. For example, Chandra Mohanty (2003) discusses in *Feminism without Borders*, “There is very little scholarship that connects pedagogical and curricular questions to those of governance, administration, and educational policy” (p. 171). This in no way suggests that there is no value in microanalyses; to the contrary, we have learned many important lessons in the interest of social justice through research and scholarship that have looked at individual elements of higher education, such as the experiences of immigrant students, faculty of color in predominantly white institutions, and women in STEM fields. The argument we are making is that as we go forward to work for social justice in higher education, we must engage the institution we study and seek to transform it, relationally, contextually, and historically. We must engage with the history that gave birth to the issues that are of concern while taking context seriously and taking the time to understand the role of history in relation to larger social realities. The structural realities that shape day-to-day experiences in higher education must feature centrally in work for social justice if we are to work toward lasting social transformation.

To fail to realize and address the impact of, for example, neoliberal economic thought on any form of social justice work in the academy today is to fail to fully understand what is at stake. It is to risk accepting a diminution of social justice as a commodity separate from material realities (Horner, 2000). Too often, mainstream perspectives on higher education facilitate a general acceptance of political, economic, and social concerns as isolated issues shaped by inevitable, individually defined, and often abstract forces (Osei-Kofi, 2003). Instead, as Carlos Alberto Torres (2009) notes about Paulo Freire’s views on education, we too insist, that “politics, power, and education are an indissoluble unit. As a set of relationships, they interpenetrate each other” (p. 66) and must be understood as such. Social justice in higher education work must therefore begin to look beyond what can be described as the scholarship of “higher education proper” to include multiple perspectives and analyses of higher education from a wide range of areas of study as diverse as political science, English, ethnic studies, women’s studies, labor studies, philosophy, critical geography, and sociology in rigorous study of the current context. One important question that resonates with us, is not only who and how can we engage social justice work in higher education, but more importantly who among us (as higher education scholars, educators, practitioners, staff, and policymakers) is willing to take the material risk to challenge and change the status quo within/outside higher education in this globalized era?

REFERENCES


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