Humanizing Scholarly Resistance: Toward Greater Solidarity in Social Justice Advocacy within the Neoliberal Academy

Samuel Museus, University of California
Humanizing Scholarly Resistance:
Toward Greater Solidarity in Social Justice Advocacy within the Neoliberal Academy

Accepted for publication June 2019

Samuel D. Museus
University of California, San Diego


Correspondence: Please send all correspondence regarding this manuscript to Samuel Museus: Professor of Education Studies; University of California, San Diego; Pepper Canyon Hall 327; 9500 Gilman Dr.; La Jolla, CA 92093; smuseus@ucsd.edu.
Abstract

In this article, the author highlights how systemic forces both fuel assaults on scholar-activists in the present day and how oppressive systems can lead to scholars responding in ways that (sub)consciously amplify and spread this systemic violence. In doing so, he demonstrates how an increased understanding of these processes might inform the ways in which scholars can more effectively navigate this turbulent terrain. Building on this analysis, he advocates for a more humanizing scholarly resistance that is grounded in humanizing critique, collective envisioning of more humanized scholarly social justice circles, and humanizing the process of advocacy.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to thank Tracy Lachica Buenavista, Nolan Cabrera, Ting-Han Chang, Katherine Cho, Jon Iftikar, Judy Marquez Kiyama, Lucy LePeau, Jacqueline Mac, Vanessa Na, Bic Ngo, Stephen John Quaye, Gary Rhoades, and the many other community and scholar activists whose ideas informed the perspectives shared herein.
In 2018, National Public Radio did a *Codeswitch* podcast on the Black musician and philanthropist Chamillionaire. Earlier that year, in the midst of mounting public discourses driving xenophobia toward immigrants and refugees, Chamillionaire heard the story of Jorge Garcia, an undocumented immigrant who was separated from his family and deported to Mexico. Moved by Jorge’s story, Chamillionaire offered to provide financial support to Garcia’s family.

Shortly thereafter, Twitter erupted with some people praising Chamillionaire for his good deeds and others offering detailed criticism of him for helping people within other racial groups instead of his own community. Chamillionaire responded with Instagram videos in which he named the anti-Mexican sentiment in communities of color, shared his story growing up surrounded by Mexican communities in Texas, and discussed being supported by Latinx people throughout his career,Justifying his actions and catalyzing even more heated debate on social media. On the podcast, Chamillionaire discussed the problems with people being quick to criticize and express hate on digital platforms. He also explained how his father was an immigrant from Nigeria, issues of documentation and deportation had always been a part of his life, and xenophobia toward immigrants negatively affects non-Mexican communities of color—important contexts that many critics did not fully comprehend or appreciate.

The Chamillionaire story can provide a springboard for fruitful discussions about the ways in which scholars within and across historically oppressed communities engage with each other and collectively advocate for social justice. For example, the story underscores how uninformed, haphazard, and impulsive attacks in the name of justice can fuel competition within and among marginalized communities, shift energy away from more fruitful conversations about how we might support each other as we engage in the already exhausting work of social justice advocacy, and upon deeper analysis seem to contribute little or nothing to the larger struggle for
justice. It also offers an example of the ways in which identity politics that hinder advocacy in the best interest of one group on the surface can ultimately harm all oppressed communities.

My aim is to accomplish two goals in this article. First, I highlight how systemic forces both fuel assaults on scholar activists in the present day and how oppressive systems can lead to these scholars responding in ways that amplify and spread this violence. In doing so, I underscore the need for more constructive dialogue about resistance dynamics within scholar-activist communities, ways to minimize violence toward each other and its undermining of larger collectivist agendas, and how to engage more constructively to collectively advance our cause. Such discussions are already taking place within larger cultural communities outside and private pockets within the academy, but they are dialogues in which education scholars rarely collectively engage on a national level. However, my analysis is grounded in the assumption that such broader discussions can be useful in helping our academic communities co-construct healthier forms of scholarly resistance that lead to tangible and positive outcomes.

Second, I utilize this analysis to offer recommendations regarding how we scholars advocating for social justice within the academy might engage each other in healthier ways that foster solidarity. Specifically, I advocate for what I call humanizing scholarly resistance. For critical scholars, it is not just important to talk, think, and write about systemic oppression—it is equally vital to recognize how these systems might shape our own thoughts and actions, and use such knowledge to understand how we can more effectively foster greater solidarity within our ranks. Before moving forward, it is useful to clarify how my positionality informs this analysis.

Author Positionality

My scholarship is mutually shaped by several salient identities. I am a multiracial Asian American scholar who identifies as a person of color, and I have a strong commitment to serving
these communities. I am ethnically Okinawan, an identity that was heavily constrained growing up in a region where *Uchinaanchu* were invisible and not well-understood by most but has nevertheless contributed to a deeper connection to and appreciation for international indigenous cultural revitalization and self-determination movements. These social identities constitute much of the core foundation upon which my current worldview is grounded.

I was also raised in a working-class family and was a first-generation college student. Throughout childhood, there were times when my family could not afford to heat our house in the subzero winter temperatures of Minnesota, could barely afford to put food on the table, was catapulted into precarious financial situations due to plant closures, and feared that we might lose our home. Perhaps it is this modest class background that makes me constantly think about how capitalism, neoliberalism, and class oppression interact with the ways in which we engage in efforts to combat racism, colonization, and other forms of systemic oppression and violence.

My identities as an able-bodied cisgender heterosexual man and a settler contributing to colonization of indigenous lands within the United States also inevitably inform my work. They remind me that, despite the fact that I hold multiple oppressed identities, I occupy various positions of privilege. These experiences are reminders that I must continuously work to understand my own privilege and minimize the damage I do because of them. These realities also remind me that, while people can try to frame themselves as flawless, never admit they are wrong, and seek reasons to pounce on others, we all make mistakes and should therefore engage other people with grace and humility. In addition, given that most or all people in society hold both positions of privilege and disadvantage, I realize that my focus should be on self-improvement and supporting the development of others, rather than on seeking opportunities to tear others down, so that we are all more effective at advancing social justice causes.
For over 15 years, I have produced scholarship and engaged in efforts to advance social justice. Some of this work has aimed to advance more radical discourses around critical race theory and intersectionality, while other strands of my advocacy have focused on strategically generating frameworks that might be more effective at guiding the implementation of culturally relevant and responsive curricula and programs in education and working with college campuses across the nation to create and expand such programs. While engaging in the latter work, I have navigated, adapted to, and individually benefited from neoliberal logics. I have also incessantly struggled with how to limit this conformity to minimize the damage that I do as I engage in social justice advocacy. Moreover, regardless of whether my work has explicitly centered oppression as the subject of analysis at any given time, a contextual understanding of systemic dehumanization has always driven my work. Engaging in these diverse forms of justice-focused research, advocacy, and dialogue has complicated my understanding of the value and limitations of various forms of social justice work and made me skeptical of any banking methods of social justice that demand a single way to be critical or effective in our advocacy.

Also relevant is the fact that I have invested significant energy in supporting many emerging scholars within and across diverse marginalized communities throughout the nation, as they learn to navigate the often-hostile politics of academia. In doing so, I have heard stories about their experiences and socialization into academic identity politics that have made me cringe and led to deep discussions about how we can and must do better to support emerging scholars—not to fuel our own egos or careers, but to help foster conditions for them to thrive. These personal realities also inexorably inform the ways in which I experience, understand, and react to the issues that I analyze in the discussion that follows. Many of the perspectives shared herein are a reflection of my own personal perspectives and analysis of the views that I have
gathered through deep and authentic conversations with many seasoned and emerging scholars throughout the nation—most of whom are women of color and each of whom I express deep gratitude for their wisdom, love, and passion. In addition, it is my commitment to these communities that drives this analysis and the resulting call to action.

**Rejecting Civility and Embracing Reflexivity**

I must be clear about what I am *not* promoting in the following discussion, so that my words are not misconstrued, decontextualized, or distorted. I am not promoting civility at the expense of social justice. The existing instability created by the social movements of the current moment present us with great opportunities for change, and this is a time for people at the margins to be bold and speak up against injustice. It is important to acknowledge that progress requires passionate and sometimes heated debate. Moreover, it is important for us to be mindful of the ways in which those in positions of power weaponize civility against critical scholars and activists. Rejecting calls for civility, however, does not mean that we relinquish all responsibility to understand the potential, unintended, and adverse effects of our behaviors. Such knowledge can allow us to more strategically channel vital emotions—such as anger, pain, and love—in ways that are healthier for our larger collective *and* move us toward envisioning and building a more just scholarly community and education system.

Nor am I prescribing acceptable forms of struggle. I believe context is important in determining the most effective strategies to resist and consequently do not promote one-size-fits-all approaches to anything. Even if we seek to engage in more loving and thoughtful dialogue, people who refuse to listen or actions that are clearly harmful might sometimes call for severe and immediate responses. Nevertheless, greater reflexivity—and understanding how our responses might potentially reinforce the core foundations of the very systems we seek to disrupt
or undermine our progress toward justice—can lead to more informed and effective strategies to navigating oppression and conflict in these turbulent political times.

**Neoconservative Attacks and Political Conflict on College Campuses**

The nation’s social and political landscape has shifted significantly over the last decade. In 2011, #Occupy Wall Street, which brought attention to society’s class exploitation and gross economic inequalities, became the largest social movement in the U.S. in several decades. Within a few years, #BlackLivesMatter renewed calls of attention to state violence plaguing Black communities and swept across the nation’s cities, #NoDAPL mobilized masses against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline in defense of sacred Native American land and environments, and the #MeToo movement brought renewed attention to systemic sexual violence against women. These social movements represent a display of democracy that challenges the status quo, by reminding society that its institutions have a moral responsibility to serve the people if they are to be part of a flourishing democracy. Given that higher education serves as a microcosm of broader society, it is not surprising that these movements have also sparked mass protests on college campuses across the nation (Museus, Ledesma, & Parker, 2016).

The backlash to these movements has also been extensive. This reaction constituted the wave upon which the current president, who ran on a campaign partially fueled xenophobia toward immigrants and refugees in 2016, rode to the White House. This course of events amplified beliefs in White victimization and White rage (Anderson, 2016), and has resulted in increases in White supremacist organizations and hate crimes across the nation (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018). There are also manifestations of this backlash on college campuses, ranging from racial slurs and swastikas written on physical structures to organized efforts to invite speakers who promote hate toward minoritized populations (Museus et al., 2015).
Of course, even if the movements for social justice have magnified the emotional backlash that has ensued, they were not the genesis of it. Rather, neoconservative ideologies were already present throughout the nation and the globe, offering conditions ripe for hostile response in the wake of progressive political protests. Neoconservatism is a political rationality that views the state as a mechanism to unite people around and reclaim “traditional” values—such as a strong state and military, revitalization of patriotism, imperialist foreign policy, and “traditional” family values and gender roles—and frames marginalized communities and identities as a threat to these values and norms (Brown, 2006; Norton, 2005). Neoconservatives believe in achieving these ends through opportunistic alliances with corporations and religion, and they are receptive to authoritarianism that aims to revive these values as well.

Not surprisingly, the resurgence in neoconservatism has engendered turbulent times for progressive academics. Perhaps one of the most telling examples of this turbulence is the recent escalation of attacks on critical scholars. Political attacks on college professors are not a new phenomenon. Over 80 years ago, conservative authors were publishing in-depth analyses of the behavior of liberal academics and warning the public against the presumed dangers of their purportedly socialist perspectives (e.g., Dilling, 1934). By the mid-20th century, such discourses were leveraged to fuel widespread movements to silence and persecute academics, as Senator Joseph McCarthy and his allies executed a national campaign against progressive professors in the U.S. As a result, many academics were not members of communist parties but vilified for speaking out against the U.S. government (Schrecker, 2010).

Over the last few years, neoconservative political organizations have revived strategic efforts to persecute liberal academics and channel significant resources into critiquing them (American Association of University Professors, 2018). These organizations train conservative
students to identify and disseminate information about academics who they believe are biased, discriminate against conservative students, and promote leftist perspectives. Since 2016 alone, these groups have funded conservative media outlets that have explicitly identified and profiled over 250 professors who they claim have discriminated against conservative students or disseminated biased information. These efforts have resulted in the harassment of faculty across the nation and a hostile academic climate. And, while these efforts produce tangible effects on individual academics, they are arguably mostly symbolic, as they fuel misbeliefs that higher education is spreading so-called liberal propaganda and discriminating against conservatives.

In the following sections, I build on the work of earlier scholars who have argued compellingly that neoconservative and neoliberal logics clash and interact to shape our conditions, perspectives, and behavior (Apple, 2006; Brown, 2006). On college campuses, the aforementioned neoconservative assaults converge with neoliberal rationalities, as the latter shapes how scholars experience and react to hostile climates and political conflict.

**Neoliberal Contexts of Political Conflict on College Campuses**

Whereas neoconservatism is a political rationality aimed at reviving perceived and proclaimed moral values, neoliberalism is a market-driven political logic (Brown, 2006, 2015). While classical liberalism denotes free markets, free trade, and entrepreneurialism, neoliberalism depicts these as normative aspects of all spheres of society and imposes this logic upon politics, government, and citizenship. As a result, neoliberal rationalities permeate and reorganize political, economic, and social systems to focus primarily on market behavior and competition at the expense of moral social imperatives (McChesney, 1999; Spooner & McNinch, 2018).

For example, neoliberalism encourages and pressures scholars to engage in maximum competition to maximizing their own security by boosting their economic worth, prestige, and
legitimacy (Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017; Darder, 2012; Davies, 2005; Lincoln, 2018). The domination of competition in the “knowledge economy” creates a culture in which faculty are socialized to constantly compare themselves to—and position themselves as better than—each other for their own individual benefit. As competition for increasingly scarce tenure-track faculty lines, external funding and rewards, recognition (e.g., via rankings and awards), and other resources becomes fiercer, strong relationships and authentic community become increasingly uncommon. As a result, beating other social justice advocates becomes just as—if not more—important than larger social justice agendas goals themselves.

Second, systems of surveillance result from the increased responsibility and burden placed on individuals (Davies, 2005). Accountability systems to monitor individual behavior are formalized and become pervasive. These systems render individual autonomy false, as people are only autonomous insofar as their behavior furthers neoliberal agendas. The pursuit of increased legitimacy, competitive individualism, and systems of surveillance ultimately erode trust among academics, and they can also contribute to faculty policing each other in myriad ways.

Finally, the consumerism, competition, surveillance, and eroded trust that spring from the neoliberal system converge to create a precarious existence for people embedded in it (Darder, 2012; Muehlebach, 2013). College and scholar rankings, resource disparities across institutions, fiscal starvation of academic departments with agendas to advance democracy, diminished tenure-track faculty lines, competition for external funding, emphases on journal impact factors, and infusion of revenue generation into assessment of faculty all intensify this precarity.

While the aforementioned influences on academic life have been analyzed, discussion about the ways in which neoliberalism shapes how we engage with each other in social justice efforts are virtually non-existent. I echo earlier calls by scholars to recognize our complicity in
(sub)consciously reinforcing toxic neoliberal systems (Authors, Groeneveld, Jackson, Mündel, & Stewart, 2007; Fine, 2018), and extend these appeals to argue that we must reflect on how neoliberal rationalities might shape our engagement with each other. How, for example, might these logics shape our thoughts and behavior as we resist systemic oppression, neoconservative assaults, and the toxicity that results from them? Within this climate, how do competition, lack of trust, and precarity make us fend for ourselves at the expense of larger social justice agendas? How do these responses reinforce the neoliberal regime and its toxicity? There are no easy answers to these questions, and even good ones might have limited explanatory power in the constantly shifting political terrain. However, the aim is to move the conversation forward by excavating and centering how neoliberal systems might shape reactions to current toxic climates, which in turn (sub)consciously reinforce neoliberal ideologies themselves.

Reactions to Neoconservative Attacks as Neoliberal Subjects

Neoliberalism operates and manifests in numerous ways (Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017), and shapes the conditions within which we experience and resist neoconservatism and other systemic forms of oppression. For example, the complex systems of surveillance that spring from the neoliberal apparatus consume significant faculty time and energy (Chomsky, 2018), leaving fewer resources to dedicate to developing meaningful strategic solutions to complex neoconservative assaults and advance social justice agendas. In addition, as pervasive neoliberal structures reward competition (Spooner & McNinch, 2018), they discourage collaboration and collective action, while inducing scholars’ policing of each other. Similarly, the focus on individual responsibility and revenue generation forces academics to dedicate increasing amounts of time and energy to compete and secure funding for research and graduate students (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), leaving them with less intellectual, emotional, and
physical energy to devote to crafting meaningful collective and strategic solutions to the neoconservative assaults that they face or advocate for justice.

It is important to recognize that neoliberal rationalities can also shape forms of resistance that, in turn, reinforce these logics. My goal is neither to argue that neoliberal ideologies are the only factor influencing scholars’ responses to neoconservative assaults, nor to suggest that neoliberal pressures shape every toxic reaction to these attacks. Indeed, factors such as stress and trauma from systemic violence shape responses to it (Truong & Museus, 2012), and some have argued that activists engage in less constructive forms of resistance to achieve immediate personal gratification (Cabrera, Matias, & Montoya, 2017; Christenson, 2011).

Nevertheless, it is imperative that we better understand the role that neoliberalism plays in shaping resistance behaviors for multiple reasons. First, neoliberalism now permeates just about every aspect of society and academia, the ways in which we understand how to survive in these contexts, and our approaches to navigating these systems. Indeed, while most or all of us advocating for social justice unequivocally reject neoconservative rationalities, the permeation of neoliberal logics throughout our education system demands at least modest conformity to them in order to survive. For many of us, these rationalities become a way of life and permeate our commonsense, even as we advocate against other forms of injustice. In turn, when our resistance aligns with neoliberal rationalities, it reifies them.

Second, neoliberal ideologies have fueled the creation of pervasive structures that are inherently designed to oversimplify complex sociopolitical issues at the expense of thoughtful developmental dialogue and strategic problem-solving—structures in which scholars are increasingly rewarded for participating. For example, social media platforms promote or require decontextualized, overly simplistic soundbites at the expense of complex analysis and reward
individual personal attacks with increased controversy, amplified visibility, and instantaneous personal gratification while diverting energy away from constructive conversations about advancing justice. Therefore, it is critical that we interrogate ways in which these structures shape our behavior and grasp how we can more constructively engage them.

One does not need to look far to see these neoliberal logics manifest within our communities, even as we engage in anti-oppression agendas. As political tensions have risen in recent years, I have observed scholars engaging in forms of resistance that are explicitly carried out in the name of justice but, upon deeper inspection, appear to embody toxic neoliberal mechanisms of unhealthy hyper-competition, hyper-surveillance (of each other), and erosion of trust within our communities. To position themselves as more “critical” than others and enhance their own legitimacy in social justice circles, I have seen scholars decontextualize and misrepresent colleagues’ work and behavior to advance misleading critiques or fabricate stories about them. To increase their visibility and advance their individual agendas, some wage uninformed and impulsive personalized attacks on social media without understanding the contexts, behaviors, or ideas of those being criticized. In competition among identity groups, I hear stories of scholars openly advocating for the constant centering of one community because it is the most oppressed, while failing to consider how other groups are subjugated and dismissing their concerns. In competition for graduate students, some scholars are known to criticize and gaslight students because they chose to work with people who do not share a specific identity with them. Moreover, I have observed the alarming emotional and psychological taxation this toxicity has on members of our communities who have dedicated their lives to social justice. In each of these examples, it is easy to see how a dehumanizing embrace of core
neoliberal tenets of individualism, hyper-competition, and horizontal hyper-surveillance can become paramount to community, solidarity, and justice.

Even if one rejects the notion that neoliberal logics are the primary cause of these forms of resistance, it is difficult to deny that such actions reify dehumanizing neoliberal ideologies and undermine collective social justice agendas. These types of defiance reinforce toxic competition, normalize choosing individual self-interest over solidarity, intensify policing of each other’s individual actions, and promote horizontal violence toward members of our own communities who are engaged in our collective struggle. Moreover, such types of resistance offer few useful strategies to generate positive outcomes for our communities, as they stifle thoughtful engagement in developmental critique, the flourishing of community, and the cultivation of collective trust. In sum, it can easily be argued that these neoliberal acts of resistance implicitly and paradoxically carry and spread the seeds of oppression, as they eradicate our collective soul, and undermine our shared capacity to create a new and better world through our advocacy. If we heed Audre Lorde’s (2003) words that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” then we might look elsewhere for healthier and more effective forms of struggle.

**Toward a More Humanizing Scholarly Resistance**

In this final section, I build on the work of scholars who have underscored the value of advancing a critical pedagogy focused on confronting abuses of power, fostering commitments to justice, forging meaningful coalitions, engaging and loving critique, developing citizens to engage in democracy, creating spaces and networks to model the society that we would like to build, and asking deeper questions about the kinds of relationships we want to cultivate (Denzin, 2018; Fine, 2018; Fantasia & Hirsch, 1995; Freire, 1989; Futrell & Simi, 2004; Harvey, 2007; Hursch & Henderson, 2011; Jovanovic, 2017; Paris & Alim, 2014). My primary concern is with
the ways in which these ideals (do not) manifest within our scholarly circles and how we might more constructively engage with, learn from, and support each other.

I am advocating for a form of resistance that is radical precisely because it prioritizes and nurtures core values that are antithetical to the dehumanization inherent in both neoconservative and neoliberal rationalities. Such resistance does not encourage impulsive reactions to the latest assault in the form of another violent or self-serving personal attack. Such strategies are grounded in complex and meaningful dialogue and approaches to social justice advocacy. They also prioritize greater solidarity, community building and healing, and love and compassion—as well as being revolutionary by modeling these values in our engagement with each other and advocacy. In doing so, these approaches can foster radical solidarity and help buffer future generations within our communities from neoliberal toxicity.

Specifically, I am advocating for a more humanizing scholarly resistance, which I define as defiance driven by continuous reflection on how our own advocacy can mutually humanize each other, minimize the horizontal violence that we enact on each other, and advance broader collective social justice agendas. This form of resistance is grounded in humanizing critique, envisioning of more humanized scholarly social justice circles, and humanizing the process of advocacy. Many education scholars across generations already embody the principles outlined herein, and they serve as exemplars of such activism.

**Humanizing Critique**

First, humanizing critique calls on us to understand and treat the subject of critique with compassion. A humanized critique of each other’s agendas, perspectives, ideas, and actions builds on values of critical consciousness (Freire, 1989), and requires us to engage in difficult conversations with courage. However, humanizing critique is equally grounded in beliefs that
humility, empathy, and love are radical revolutionary values that should drive our interactions, engagement, advocacy, and way of living (Boggs, 2012; Johnson, 2019).

Engaging in humanizing critique requires that we understand the complex contexts, perspectives, and actions of other social justice scholars and activists who we evaluate before concluding that we know what is right or righteous about them and their work. If this is our starting point, then we transcend posturing acknowledgements of others’ work and positioning ourselves as more critical than them, so that we can meaningfully understand the unique and complex historical, social, and political contexts within which those scholars and activists have struggled, authentically engage and appreciate their efforts, learn from the ways in which they pushed boundaries to create the conditions within which we exist today, and focus on building on their efforts. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (2014) offers a powerful model of such humanized analysis. While she could easily blast her Black school teachers as uncritical for not openly advocating or even knowing the language of feminism, she emphasizes how they created possibilities of critical thought that ultimately advanced anti-sexist agendas and prepared her to do anti-oppression work. Equally important, critique that takes into account the complex contexts within which advocacy transpires maximizes the likelihood that we accurately engage (and do not misrepresent) each other’s ideas, supports each other’s growth, and cultivates our own skills engaging others in humanizing advocacy. It ensures that our analyses are not dehumanizing.

**Envisioning More Humanizing Scholarly Circles**

Second, we might benefit greatly from a collective envisioning of our scholarly circles. Scholars have excavated the ways in which social activists create spaces that temporarily free them from oppressive structures, facilitate formation of their collective identities, and allow them to model the more humanized society they seek to build (Boggs, 2012; Fantasia & Hirsch, 1995;
While our scholarly circles regularly convene to collectively critique systemic oppression, we rarely gather to collectively grapple with how we reinforce systemic oppression ourselves and can more effectively engage each other to advance the cause.

If we intentionally organize spaces to envision more humanized scholarly communities, it can allow us to foster a collective consciousness of the ways in which we might minimize horizontal violence through our advocacy and provide opportunities to model healthier ways of engaging that cultivate greater solidarity. When I had the opportunity to co-facilitate a national conference discussion about the role of race in research many years ago, participants co-constructed such a conversation. Deviating from traditional hierarchical conference spaces, we created a circle with our chairs and engaged in genuine dialogue about the horizontal violence transpiring within scholarly communities of color—not to attack the character of individual scholars, but to discuss how we can more effectively support each other and improve our collective approaches to advocacy. As many emerging scholars shared their perspectives, it was obvious that they were grappling with these problems and were hungry for a collective dialogue focused on addressing them. It is important to note that the very act of engaging in these more humanizing spaces and discussions is a form of resistance to neoliberal forces that constantly work to dehumanize our thoughts, behaviors, and interactions (Giroux, 2008, 2011).

**Humanizing Through the Process of Resistance**

Finally, a more humanizing scholarly resistance requires a relentless prioritization of community impact over individual self-interests. Prioritizing collective impact does *not* mean haphazardly launching any individual attack, so long as it can be done in the name of social justice. If we are to think about our role in advancing justice within a neoliberal era carefully and critically, our actions would focus on both the outcome *and the process* of struggle. Valuing the
process of struggle requires a continuous emphasis on understanding how we can help those with whom we resist thrive. Moreover, just as earlier scholars built the platform on which we struggle today, we in the present should embrace a responsibility to serve emerging and future generations of scholar activists by engaging in deeper dialogues and more complex efforts to build new structures and tools that help buffer them from vertical and horizontal violence.

There are several barriers to enacting the values and priorities mentioned above. Neoliberal contexts render us all vulnerable to shifting into survival mode when we are under duress, increasing the likelihood that we ignore the need for compassion in our engagement with each other. Differences in salaries, external revenue generated, and recognition—those toxic neoliberal metrics of success—fuel anxiety and problematic justifications for behaviors that reinforce and amplify neoliberal logics. Within neoliberal contexts, we are socialized into believing that we are perpetually in a precarious situation and that our engagement in toxic forms of competition will significantly improve our security, which is often false prophecy. It behooves our broader communities to create spaces to unlearn these rationalities and collectively figure out what compassionate scholarship for justice means to us. Even if we create such spaces, embracing the challenge to unlearn these logics and develop collective vision requires an investment of substantial time, energy, and determination among all involved.

It is vital that we consider the role of our positionality in these efforts as well. For example, junior faculty, non-tenure-track faculty, and graduate students are often the most coerced into spending the crux of their time navigating the neoliberal structures that permeate the academy. While it is easy for senior faculty to dismiss these concerns because we have survived the current system for so long, it is our responsibility to facilitate efforts to resist it. In addition, those with multiple marginalized identities, such as women of color, are too-often expected to do
the type of organizing for which I advocate—work not rewarded by pervasive neoliberal surveillance systems. Therefore, those of us who continually benefit from systemic privileges have an obligation to invest energy in creating spaces for such re-envisioning to occur as well.

In addition, a barrier to relentlessly prioritizing collective welfare over self-interest is the reality that many of us who engage in social justice advocacy can easily convince ourselves and claim that everything we do is just if it is overtly carried out in the name of justice, even when these actions amplify neoliberal toxicity and obstruct our collective capacity to develop revolutionary relationships and community. We should, therefore, diligently help each other be reflexive about our approaches to social justice scholarship and advocacy—not with an end goal of tearing each other down, but instead with a focus on mutual moral and spiritual growth.

We have a choice to use our positionalities as weapons to destroy the communities that we love, or we can leverage them to build and rebuild these circles. Invoking Martin Luther King, the late Grace Lee Boggs (2012) reminded us that, “struggle doesn’t always have to be confrontational but can take the form of reaching out to find common ground with the many ‘others’ in our society,” it is critical to “go beyond protest and negativity and build community because community is the most important thing that has been destroyed by the dominant culture,” and “revolutions are made not to prove the correctness of ideas but to begin anew” (pp. 48-51). To advance justice with revolutionary love for our communities, we must work responsibly to minimize toxic defiance, help each other thrive in our collective struggle, and engage in humanizing forms of scholarly resistance that can help us begin anew.

References

American Association of University Professors (2018). What is Turning Point USA?

Washington, DC: Author.


