

Chapter 13. Navigating on the Wrong Side of Privilege: Building a New Common Sense

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When my academic career began, I had a solid sense of being on the wrong side of privilege. I felt that sense imbued in almost every action taken for almost the first fifteen years of being a professor. As privilege accumulated (tenure, reduced teaching, grant funds), I began to witness the academy from a different position—that of an insider. I found myself beginning to accept the “limits” of what a professor, department, or university could achieve. My vision began to align with the pragmatism of the institution. It was professionally and personally a precarious time for me. To put it in Gramscian terms, I began to find myself gliding comfortably into being a traditional intellectual, shoring up traditions and disciplinary concepts rather than continuing to maintain an organic connection to the communities that had worked so hard on my behalf. In concluding this collection of essays, I wanted to highlight that trajectory as an almost cautionary tale, explaining how (hopefully) I have continued to keep a consistent moral trajectory.

My hope is that the essays that precede this conclusion speak to the diverse community, academic, and international colleagues who have influenced my research, teaching, and advocacy. I wanted to end the collection, though, by highlighting three colleagues whose careers over decades have tried to model an ethical and intersectional form of advocacy that enables them to be an accomplice in the work of those on the wrong side of privilege in creating actual material political change. And in particular, I wanted to highlight three colleagues who shared my subject position (CIS-gendered White male), with all the inherent privileges it might authorize, but who dedicated their time to pushing against the system which ensured their own comfort. Sometimes, I think, it is up to those born into or who work into positions of privilege to teach each other how to work for justice. And to teach each other that we must overcome our sanctioned ignorance, our privilege as our loss, if we are to be effective. What follows is one trajectory of how I learned such lessons.

Writing Beyond the Curriculum

I have been in dialogue with Eli Goldblatt for over three decades. But as I made clear in the opening of this collection, our first discussions were over the public role of rhetoric and composition; more precisely on how to bend the language of our field to create greater opportunities for advocacy focused on structural change. In the conversation below, we reflect on our “Writing Beyond the Curriculum” article, reminding ourselves of why the concept was a useful tool to begin our work as well as how the argument might have hopefully influenced the field a bit. We end by considering how one element of our argument, fostering new collaborations, might be even more relevant at this current moment.

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Parks: I picked up “Writing Beyond the Curriculum” while bringing together the essays for this project. I don’t think I had read the essay in over twenty years. For instance, I had completely forgotten that our work was framed in terms of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC). With so much time passing, my memory had recast the origin of our work, incorrectly, as based in advocacy, theories of political change. So maybe a good place to start our discussion is with the question, “Why WAC? Why not Cultural Studies? Social Movement Theory?”

Goldblatt: Working a WAC program was really what I was hired to do as Writing Program Director at Temple University. I didn’t really know very much about WAC when I was hired. I knew folks in WAC, but I didn’t really know even very much about writing program administration. I’d been a professor for five years. I was just getting my feet underneath me about what I wanted to teach, what I wanted to write. And I had just published my first book, *Round My Way* (1995). When I got to Temple, I really was thinking very hard about how writing connected and ran against the grain of disciplinarity. I felt too constrained by writing across the curriculum. I felt that there were a lot of issues around literacy and around university learning that were not really being considered by any of our colleagues, both inside the department and outside. And that I was also really losing track of the fact that there was a life outside of the campus. That had always been so important to me. So, I think the WAC part probably came from my position within the hierarchy of both the department and the university. We needed a base. And it could not be an academic base, such as cultural studies, because there was no cultural studies or, really, any of that work. None of those existed at Temple. We needed a concept like “writing beyond the curriculum.”

Parks: I remember when I landed at Temple, besides the fact I had no money, thinking, well, now I’m in safely within a left leaning community. The fact that there was no cultural studies program or, at least in the English department, any public work was surprising to me. I assumed that Temple English professors, like Dan O’Hara, had established such work in the department. I thought the department was going to be deeply committed to public engagement. Probably

not “in the streets” engagement, but at least noticing the streets. It wasn’t at all. And then, it struck me: Everybody wanted to be Harvard. And I quickly decided, fairly or not, that the literature faculty were not interested in my public work. They just didn’t care. I didn’t quite get why they hired me, to be honest. So, I can remember very strategically thinking of what are the other constituencies with whom I might align? I think in a similar way to you, I needed some sort of label or disciplinary backing to look legible so that I wouldn’t just get pulled under the “Let’s be Harvard” framework. I thought WAC was great for that purpose. It was such a central term and then we twisted it. Do you know what I mean? To my thinking, basically, I thought we could move across disciplines without actually saying cultural studies.

Goldblatt: The turn to WAC was really about institution building. We were trying to do something radical, but within our awareness of the institutional limits. We wanted to see a writing program as more extensive, or at least more flexible, than anybody imagined. We soon realized that we were going to have to make shit up to do what we wanted to do. It just wasn’t there in the field, at least not until Ellen Cushman’s “The Rhetorician as an Agent for Social Change” (1996). That was a really important article, as was the work Linda Flower and her team were doing in Pittsburgh. We began to develop relationships with the people we knew nationally who were interested in what became known as “community literacy.” All of us were all trying to develop the language, the intellectual approach, and the institutional platforms to do this kind of work.

Parks: I think that’s very true. This could just be my own arrogance, but I think the Institute and New City Community Press were two of the first very successful community-focused project in a department or in a college at that time—notwithstanding potentially earlier models in the 60’s or 70’s. I feel “Writing Beyond the Curriculum” helped us create something new for that moment. I like to think we can see elements of our work in many community projects today. Again, that might be wishful thinking. But as I reread our article recently, I began to wonder if certain elements of our argument failed to gain traction in the field.

In the article, there is a lot of talk about bridging between departments, between our college and the school of education, between faculty and public-school teachers, about trying to create bridges with literature faculty. I don’t know if I think of community engagement as concerned with those issues anymore. I think the field has gotten more self-contained. It has more of its own mechanisms to produce and distribute its work. I don’t know if community literacy sees itself as having to link with literature faculty or sees public schools as a primary target anymore. Sometimes it seems that the work is much more focused on ideological positions that might frame itself more as “in the streets” than as coalition building to materially rebuild the streets.

Goldblatt: I think that, in general, the field has really followed a professionalizing line. It was a jagged line, but it was a line which kind of ends up in writing about writing. And then there was this counter response that was associated with

the racial reckoning after George Floyd. From my own perspective speaking from my retirement room, I don't feel like I even have the right to say what the field is or where the field is right now. But I don't hear people talking about some of the very basic concerns that I had going into it 30, 35 years ago. How do we help people write better so that they can accomplish what they want to accomplish? Or how do you get people who write in all kinds of contexts to see that they have something in common, something they could share with each other?

Parks: I feel like everyone's moved into their little domain because there's enough resources that you can now live in your little domain. Not in terms of a living wage, of course, but in terms of having avenues to publish, present your work, teach your classes. Consequently, you don't have to build coalitions that can build a "new middle" to gain access to an audience. There is, in some ways, less of a need for a new common sense that can give you power. But I feel like a lot of "Writing Beyond the Curriculum" is about us learning how to navigate the power networks of Temple University and the discipline. And our answer was coalition building, basically, because we had to join constituencies together to have our own platform.

Without that material need, I feel like now there is an argument about keeping a sense of purity in our field; a sense that other communities can be dismissed if not properly aligned with a particular stance or position. That's why I think the subtitle of our essay, "fostering new collaborations," is the part of the article that seems to have had the least traction, but, today, is probably the most important point to be made. I see hundreds of interesting projects, but I don't see a lot of cross identity or cross institutional collaboration—with the exception of the CCCC identity caucuses and SIGS. And I worry that without a push to actually rebuild a coalition that can effect change, protect our institutions, what we consider to be our public work will be gutted by neoliberal higher education frameworks which will beggar our students and dismantle their future. See West Virginia University.

Goldblatt: I think the idea of coalition building needs to be seen within a much longer time frame. I think right now we're in an era of people pulling back into their camps. There's a certain level of self-protective cadre building. I think that the idea of coalitions, the idea of the power of the middle, as you say, is not a popular idea. I think that's a shame. But again, it's not really my place to call people out for not doing it. I do think that my attempts in the last five years to write about, and encourage other people to write about, literature and literacy as having some shared intellectual and institutional ground is aimed at such coalition building.

In my recent essay collection, *Alone with Each Other: Literacy and Literature Intertwined*, I have tried to make the argument for building cross disciplinary bridges. Perhaps more precisely, I have tried to indicate arenas in which a wide variety of writers and thinkers can talk to each other, even though they come from very different literacy orientation. I think that it's still very important and

valuable work to recognize each other, respect each other, and move forward with some sense of what we want to accomplish in common. I don't see that happening a lot, but I will say this: I see a tremendous hunger for that kind of move beyond disciplinary limits. In a new collection Jonathan Alexander and I are co-editing, the contributors—especially scholars of color—have written compellingly about not accepting the conventional division between literature and literacy. Today, students are using literature as well as other genres to speak out of their own identities, to shape their own sense of power and history. I don't think that hunger goes away. I don't think that those types of coalitions have fallen out of fashion.

Parks: I don't know. I think certain forms of collaboration, the literature/literacy faculty talking to each other, that's still there. In some ways there's more of a desire for it. I think one of the reasons literature and literacy folks are probably aligning a bit more is a sense that, together, they have more power. They have a greater voting bloc. But I feel within the field there's a hesitancy to step out of a very fixed political position and move towards something that would pull in someone else's political position, partially out of a sense of purity, partially out of a sense of risk. It is risky to say certain things right now. But if we live within our risk bubbles, we also never gain the real power to change the structures which repress and oppress those on the wrong side of privilege.

And I'm not sure that for all of our speaking and writing about how "we are political" if, as a field, we actually spend time working through how that means you have to step off your particular position; that you have to build coalitions which expand your powerbase across many communities, even if you find elements of their community objectionable. I often say that to build coalition, for instance, you have to talk to the police as if they're just family members and not cops. You have to see past the uniform to see the potential of building an alliance. But when I say this in a class, you could not get a quieter classroom. You could not get a more silent moment with your colleagues. But that's the move that I thought community literacy would foster. This recognition of the difficult work required to build new and actual coalitions of power. When I review articles, book proposals, manuscripts, I just don't see a governing sense of how power works, which I find disappointing.

Goldblatt: The reason it's hard for us to articulate that stance and to achieve it is because it's very, very hard to do. And most people are much happier drawing on their particular group. They want to stay on their bowling team. And it's very hard to do the other stuff. This is talking about things that are difficult to say. I have no commitment to a specific religious position. I don't want to be a representative of any particular religion. But I will say that, and this comes from my experience at Villanova's Center for Peace and Justice Education, among other places, certain religious orientations do offer this additional yearning for something that is not simply "my side" winning. Now, we unfortunately don't often see mainstream religious organizations act out of this wider yearning, an impulse that goes beyond tolerance to solidarity and acceptance. But there is a way of

religious thinking that searches for meaning and advocacy not simply rooted in the material benefit of one group or another. We see this desire for unity, for example, in the POWER Interfaith Movement. I believe there is a moral imperative to do this work. There is a value in saying certain ways of being have moral weight to them. And I think as I'm reading what we wrote twenty-four years ago, that's always been our orientation. Our orientation has always been "being with others."

Parks: When I wrote this article, I was much more anti-essentialist, deconstructionist. But the more I work with global human rights and democratic advocates, they are possessed of such a strong moral certitude about the importance of seeing oneself as "being with others," needing to see the necessity of working with others for the collective good. I have found myself embracing that stance. I don't think I would have been as open to that stance during my anti-essentialist days. And I still carry a sense of any community as tentative and necessarily creating an *other*. But increasingly, I see the importance of speaking in terms of fundamental values of justice, democracy, and human rights.

I think the phrase I've been using lately, that has been lingering in my head, we are essentially responsible for each other. There's an essential connection there mandates we're not allowed to sit back. You know what I mean? When I first went to Temple, I recognized that certain colleagues thought they were allowed to sit back, to not get involved. Back then and still today, that seems unethical to me. I've worked with or interviewed advocates from all over the world. Folks who have suffered some horrible abuses for their advocacy. Sometimes I'll interview them in front of my class. And I usually end with a question, such as "You have been in prison, released, imprisoned again, tortured, released, imprisoned, tortured, brutalized, released. Why didn't you stop? Why do you continue?" And to a person, they do not understand the question. They are necessarily connected to the welfare of others. "What do you mean stop?" That's where my head is right now.

Goldblatt: I really understand that idea of saying, how would you quit? What would you do? You don't have the luxury of quitting.

Parks: Exactly it. To me it's like the moment when my students understand commitment because they're all wondering why the advocate didn't quit. Mind you, almost every advocate they meet has been brutally tortured. Part of this work is just so depressing. But they do not quit. It's a moral obligation to others. Since re-reading our article, I was wondering if that moral obligation might replace WAC, which frames our work in terms of strategy of utilizing a home constituency and not ethics. I wonder how much of our own subject position might also have been critiqued through such an ethical lens. I think I'd probably make a much more ethical argument, one which might implicate us much more directly.

Goldblatt: I think that the concept of home constituency is one that needs really to be, as they say, examined. Much, much more than we did. But we were in a very different time of our lives. The field was in a very different time. And for that matter, English was at a different time. I mean, when we were doing this,

if the English department lost its Shakespearean, the Provost would immediately give them a line to replace their Shakespearean scholar. That's not true anymore. And literature faculty don't have the privileges that they had 25, 30, 40, maybe 50 years ago. They don't have the aura of Matthew Arnold's mission to teach "the best that has been thought and said." To some extent, their fall in power and prestige is their own damn fault. And to some extent, the world has just changed, not entirely for the worse. But I think if we were to write this today, we couldn't write what we wrote because we were trying to change very different institutional structures then. Educational institutions are in a very different place today. American "higher education" as a whole has to rediscover its core mission.

Parks: The lesson I learned with the Institute is always build your own structure, one that exists between all the other structures, because then you're never captured. But you're also very unstable. I mean, the other part of this is the institute New City lasted for 20 years. I mean, in one form or another, it's kind of continued, which I think is not unimportant. You kept it going.

Goldblatt: I'm retired now but the work actually still continuing, Steve. The Temple Writing Program is still engaging with schools to help support kids. Tree House Books, which New City helped to found and fund, is an afterschool literacy program going strong and in fact expanding this year. So, there are traces of the Institute that still function in North Philadelphia.

Sinners Welcome

My decade long dialogue with John Burdick ended on July 4th, 2020, when he succumbed to cancer. The absence of his voice this volume (and in my current work) is and always will remain heartbreaking to me.

I met John within a month of my move to Syracuse University's rhetoric and composition program. Over the course of our conversations, we developed many curricular and community-based efforts, partially documented in "Sinners Welcome." What is not fully expressed in that article (and was to be the focus of a jointly written article prior to his diagnosis) is an argument about the actual work of advocacy. What I learned from John was that while my work might invoke advocacy, there was not an actual model of political change operating within the projects. "Literacy" provided a vocabulary about change, but not a set of tools to create change. John provided political change models, such as those by Marshall Ganz, as well as concrete experience in building an advocacy organization, the Westside Residents' Coalition.

Within those lessons was also an emerging sense of coalitional politics. In meeting after meeting, John would navigate the alternative possibilities being discussed to find a common ground, sometimes on the thinnest of premises, that would allow a movement to build allies, gain strength. He also demonstrated the value of talking to your opponent, understanding that beneath a title or a uniform was a human being with whom a connection could be made. It was out of

those experiences that an effort to rebuild *common sense* emerged in my work as a strategic model of change designed to engage with actual structures of power. My sense then, and now, was that John refused to rest comfortably within the privileges offered him as a full professor at an elite private university. He was continually opening himself up to being challenged for his blind spots, his assumed sense of stability or resources. If Eli had offered a pathway to navigate an institution, using privileged terms to push resources to systemically marginalized communities, John provided the ethical self-awareness necessary to ensure the uses of such resources were democratically decided upon.

And in some ways, this is the central struggle—navigating a privileged discourse and resource rich institution through the lens of the communities intentionally excluded from power. Within that nexus, the *professor* faces fundamental choices about identity, identification. I have found it is somewhat easy to secure funds for community projects which accept the ruling logic of privilege. Think neoliberalism coupled with disciplinary progressive language. Think the bake sale fund raiser, the after-school arts program. Clearly such efforts provide resources to communities. Clearly, they offer universities the opportunity to show their public commitment. I would argue such projects also allows many tenure/tenure-track professors to rest comfortably within their privileged positions. (Such a framework often won't even consider the status of adjunct professors; the important work of community college teachers actually teaching the students who enter college from resource excluded communities). What is much harder to gain support, funding to create are efforts which use the framework of the community to restructure the workings of an academic department, public project, college, or university. It is almost ludicrous to suggest such an outcome is even possible.

And yet . . .

By working with John, I began to see how the coalitions across different communities might begin to pressure a change in behavior by a university. *The Westside Residents Coalition*, discussed in “Sinners’ Welcome,” did, in fact, alter how a multi-million-dollar university-sponsored gentrification project went about its work. It did alter the behavior of police assigned to ensure the Westside residents understood a *new regime* was constellating their community. I am not arguing some type of coup d'état occurred; this was much more a Gramscian war of position. But what it did demonstrate was the power of not acceding to the limited position of a *professor who does outreach*. That instead, a coalitional politics that aligned with the community's vision could manipulate that *professor* subjectivity into a tool for change. That was only possible, however, if I pushed back against a traditional framing and maintained an organic relationship to the communities which created me. And I would only be effective if I also maintained an ethical stance that allowed disciplinary terms to be redefined for purposes other than intended.

I suppose such lessons might have been learned through reading scholarly articles of the time. I will remain forever grateful, though, for John having been such an effective teacher.

The Democratic Future Project

As detailed in the preceding essays, at a certain point, my work moved to an international context. And here again I can thank John Burdick, through whom I became associated with Syracuse University's program supporting democratic advocates from the then-recent Arab Spring. This work led to my co-creating Syrians for Truth and Justice while at Syracuse. Today, however, that work has led to a new project at my new institutional home, the University of Virginia. The Democratic Futures Project (DFP) is an alliance of academics, advocates, and policy makers focused on supporting grassroots efforts at democratic change in authoritarian nations. The DFP supports academic/advocate research alliances which bend university methodologies to produce the knowledge needed in real time by non-violent movements for change. To support these efforts, DFP has created a series of undergraduate required writing courses where international democratic advocates bring students directly into their projects, asking them to research specific needs then produce public writing which addresses those needs. Think *Writing Across Nations* or *Writing Beyond Authoritarianism*.

A central partner in this effort has been Srdja Popović, whose OTPOR! organization deposed Serbian authoritarian leader Slobodan Milosevic. Since that time, Popović has helped to co-create the Center for Applied Nonviolent Actions and Strategies (CANVAS), which has provided training in non-violent social movement practices in over 53 countries and, for which, it was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. In the dialogue that follows, we discuss how the academy must transform its identity to fulfill its rhetoric of supporting democracy and human rights across the globe. And we discuss how, in particular, this means altering the way we teach students about literacy, advocacy, and political change.

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**Parks:** One of the issues we've worked on quite a bit is whether there is a role for academics in supporting the work of global democratic advocates. What did you imagine to be the traditional role of academics working with advocates, prior to our partnership? How would you describe the best model of such a partnership?

**Popović:** Looking from the point of activists within the pillar of academia, I will use my usual approach. The academy is a very important institution which can be pulled in many different ways. To some extent there is a growing interest in academia about social change, about how it is achieved, and about the role of social movements. There is also no lack of people discussing the disconnect between public mobilization and the quality of democracy in the country. So, the interest is there. However, the way academia approaches this is very dry. And it is dry, in my opinion, from two different perspectives. One perspective that it is looking at the dead things. It looks at data. It looks at history. It looks at

conditions. It looks at the unmovable things that are too exact to be applicable. And what I learned through my work of empowering advocates is that skills are more important than conditions.

Two, academia doesn't interact enough with live people, with actual advocates. I think more interaction with live people, which is what we try to achieve through the Democratic Futures Project, provides an important opportunity for research. It is one thing when you are looking at articles. But there is no academic writing that can express the power of meeting advocates. You can get the story about the dates and the times and the number of the times a political video has been seen, such as with Evan Mawarire's #ThisFlag video. But hearing Evan's story about how he was praying with the police that were about to arrest him gives you a very different angle about the dynamics of the struggle. This is exactly the moment where you see everybody's jaw drop. It is not only because the story is great and touching and appealing on an emotional level. It is also that you never think about social movements with this particular angle. I believe that more interaction with advocates leads to better understanding and, probably, better analyzing of the situation.

Such interaction also leads to understanding the needs of advocates. There are a lot of needs that academia can meet when it comes to the world of activists. Some of these needs are pretty obvious. You need to study more, you need to write more, you need to research more on the work of activists. I'm just to co-publish a paper with my friends, Slobodan Kjinvoic and Professor Edwin Mujkic, from UCCIS, on the innovative tactics of OTPOR! resistance movement in Serbia, which happened over 23 years ago. The fact that I, a non-academic, should have to write down in academic writing such simple advocate actions, like the use of parallel vote tabulation, dilemma actions, humor, branding, means nobody has really published about one of the most influential movements in this field. And I'm not praising it because it's my movement. It was copied Georgia. It was copy and pasted in Ukraine. In Egypt. The question is "Why? What about the movement allows such connections between different countries?" And you only understand these connections if you talk to the advocates on the ground, who are using prior movements, and creating actual change in situations where scholarly research argues change is impossible. Advocate voices can alter how research understands the possibility of political change.

**Parks:** Why do you think academics don't reach out to advocates? What is your sense of why these interactions don't happen?

**Popović:** I think for some reason academia is very locked into a certain toolbox. And with any toolbox, you only have a certain number of tools, like a hammer. Every problem looks the same, like a nail that needs struck. So, when I was invited to do the joint research on of the most thrilling and inspiring elements of nonviolent tactics-phenomena we call dilemma actions, with amazing Penn State Professor Sophia McLennan and Professor Joe Wright, I was thrilled. However, throughout the process I was overwhelmed with academic criteria, and figured

out that most of the time what you do is you are digging through this methodology of how academic research should be structured in order to be published. My point of view is always, “Cmon . . . These are live cases. This is what has happened. This is what we need to really touch people. To help them see how to create change.” But as primary target of academic research is academic audience, now you need to focus on for me very exotic things like data set or “coding”. And within the process of creating a dataset and coding, if you have half of my activist mindset you lose every single motivation to even talk about it. That’s the point. It’s like that the very academic process that is kind of designed to kill anything which is inherent to the actual advocacy. There are certain scholarly norms which needs to be fulfilled, of course and I understand that. But unless academics expands its toolbox, I don’t find it of much use to advocates defending and expanding democracy globally. Our work on dilemma actions may be one of most useful practical finding in the field, clearly showing that creative planning of tactics increases possibility for success of nonviolent movements. But if it had stayed only in excel sheet dataset table—no advocate in the world would ever read it, nonetheless use some of its important findings. This is why the Penn State team and mine have taken a different approach, and created platform for activists as well...but I will talk later about that.

**Parks:** It is generous of you to equate academic theory with a toolbox, given most academics are not in a position to actually get their hands dirty in creating political change. Some of this is that the current labor situation in the academy produces a precariat labor force where the economic risk can be too great to speak out. But I also think that academics are not really provided with a “toolbox” that contains the tools to create change. We are taught theories of change, but not the process of building coalitions, analyzing pillars of power, etc. When we work with advocates, that is, we are driven by research models that create “data sets,” not alliances that support actual movement needs. And given the tremendous pressures faced by advocates, particularly within authoritarian countries, it is not like answering academic questions are at the top of their agenda. How might this lack of communication, partnership, be addressed?

**Popović:** I see several quick fixes or quick tips about how to make this process more effective. First of all, the people who are fighting for democracy, they are alive. They are very accessible. And if you bring them to your campus, if you give them a temporary home, they can help academics learn what questions are being faced by advocates. Through sustained dialogue, new research angles might be developed to create a proper long term cooperative relationship. If we want to study how certain elements of democratic advocacy (or how democracy advocacy works generally), we should be linking people operating in interesting environments with academia, meaning they are in touch with professor, with students. Because the marvelous things can happen from these interactions. These interactions are kind of making advocates getting more “scientific” and academics getting more in touch with real frontline.

**Parks:** I agree, but part of the difficulty is how the university has framed who is an intellectual. To a great extent, the university has defined the intellectual as the person with the Ph.D., with the published articles, with, as you say, footnotes. An intellectual is someone who perpetuates the university system. And I think part of the struggle of creating this possibility is working to redefine the intellectual as someone with organic knowledge of their community, its aspirations, and unique understanding of democracy. I think there is a pull to continually define intellectual knowledge as that which serves the academy, instead of knowledge that serves the community. There is just more prestige and comfort in taking that position professionally. There are no merit points for providing resources for advocates pressuring for systemic change. In fact, success in the academy is pretty much premised on activities that shore up its intellectual status.

**Popović:** In my language, that's a target audience issue. Clearly academics are trained, used to writing the articles that will be published in academic journals, then read, peer reviewed and quoted by other academics (in academic journals, where else?). They are creating useful knowledge—but mostly for each other and in part for students. It is also about their production of the research. It goes to the audience which keeps operating in a more or less closed circle or at least closed to those who are most in need for this type of insights. It's not only that they're listening mostly to other academics, but they also seem to not understand how to listen to the activists or produce something in activists (very different) language.

**Parks:** This makes me think of your research with Sophia McClellan on dilemma actions and humor, which you mentioned earlier. As part of this project, you created an extensive Excel sheet with thousands of points of data. And while it might be somewhat true that the “data” killed the live parts of the advocacy, you are now sharing this data with advocates as you move across the globe. You are almost acting as a transfer portal between academics and advocates.

**Popović:** As someone who deeply understand the value of “doers” Sophia and Joe took innovative approach, and decided to do “hard science part” but let me and CANVAS team to act like a bridge. So on top of research and dataset and coding our clear attempt was to make something “user friendly” for those who may apply it—activists and advocates themselves. This is how “Tactics4change” ([www.tactics4change.org](http://www.tactics4change.org)) the interactive website and platform which is based on the research was born. The website is easy to navigate, has appealing design and people can add their cases. The world of activists is world of interactions, so on Tactics4Change people who are interested in creative activism can not only see each of these cases, but upload their own cases of dilemma actions as well; actually contributing to the sample of the database! It is a great tool for advocates. And aims to be fruitful harvest for a dataset.

In fact, In the first two months of website traffic we assume that almost 90% of the website audience was not from academia but from the frontline advocates or professionals that are working in organizations related to advocacy. And yes... three of us will also publish an article based on the dataset which will be aimed

towards the academics, and hopefully a prestigious scientific journal will take it. And thus enable wider academic outreach and possible more funding to expand the research, that's all very important. But at the same time there will be a guy fighting environmental degradation of a forest in Africa who is scrolling through 420 cases of creative activism listed on Tactics4Change and thinking "Wow, I may actually TRY some of these". This "forked" approach, if you want, is where you really want to look in a long term. And where I see the future of initiatives like this research, such as our Democracy Futures Project or our annual People Power Academy, which brings activists to UVA. Whatever kind of academic research on democracy or social change you are doing, start thinking about how to make it relevant to advocates, how to make it accessible and cool and readable and appealing, so that activists will read or get inspired.

**Parks:** As you just said, we are testing out a similar idea at the University of Virginia, through the Democratic Futures Project. We have two students who have built a web portal where advocates can request a particular type of support—research, webpage development, social media support, etc. UVA students can then volunteer their time to meet this need. In a sense, we are indirectly demonstrating that their "academic intellect" can be used in support of "organic intellectuals" working for their community. Which is to say that there are amazing projects that help activists at the same time as they are building interesting opportunities for academia to expand their students' education. And to be honest, I think students are getting bored with just theory classes. They love the opportunity to do real advocacy.

**Popović:** This is really the model of our Democratic Futures Project courses as well as my own courses in Colorado College. (We also hope that People Power Academy, the CANVAS/UVA joint venture which brings fifty advocates for weekend of learning and sharing *at* the academic institutions may be the right path forward.) In these courses (and events), students study the theory and the history of a democratic movement. But then they have an advocate from Burma, an advocate from Zimbabwe, an advocate from Poland, an advocate from Black Lives Matter taking part in the class through Zoom. So, they were looking at the case study, they were looking at the theory, but here, there is the live person in front of them. For two hours, this live person is their resource. The level of engagement skyrocketed not because I'm a good teacher, but because these guest advocates bring new quality to class process and students end up working on something very unusual for them. Students are like, "I have this opportunity to work for real change and interact with people who are doing it every day. Of course, I'm going to get engaged."

**Parks:** It's true. I'm often seen as a very cool political professor because all I do is say, "Here's Felix Maradiaga. Here's Evan Mawarire. Here's Evgeniya Chirikova." The advocates then change the room from a classroom to a being a space to do real public work. But there is a related issue to a classroom with an advocate attending our classes. There is a lot of angst right now about faculty being political

and ideological. There's a blowback to advocacy in the academy. But what my students soon notice is that when we have the advocates come in, the advocates are all about rebuilding "the middle." They talk about building coalitions which can pull down oppressive pillars of power and reconstitute them in the interests of those on the wrong side of privilege. The advocate's very presence critiques a certain form of purist radical rhetoric that can inhabit a classroom or a university.

I think my students find it interesting that activism is coalition building. It's not just like, "I'm going to protest on a corner or ask folks to sign a petition." It's like, no, you have to work with other people to get the change you want. And I don't think that's something that they learn. My students don't have a roadmap to connect their education and their ethics to activism. Then these advocates come and tell how they did it. It almost bridges the gap for them. They see that they could become an Evan Mawarire or Evgenia Chirikova or a neighborhood advocate. It takes the mystery out of the process. It shows that it is a process of small tactical steps within a larger strategy. And, importantly, anyone can take those steps.

**Popović:** In order to be successful, you need to build coalitions and you need to figure out what constitutes "the middle." You need to figure out the pillars that are supporting corruption or injustice, and how shifting the pillars is related to changing an institution's behavior. So yes, we can make a protest. But does that change anything by itself? What other strategies are possible? Consider Ukraine. Putin invaded Ukraine. People are dying. Kids are studying in a subway stations. It's like no doubt "What the hell is happening." Students can go out and wave the flag. They can put it on social media. But if they are a class where they study their local terrain, they can develop more effective local responses within that terrain to the conflict. We had this class in digital campaigning here where we just outlined the spectrum of allies near Colorado College. They were looking at the community of Colorado Springs and identified a bakery owned by a Ukrainian. Then they identified somebody in the local media who is of Ukrainian origin. They also identify the person who is working in a generator factory. Then the students connected all three in a campaign where they're bringing the person who has a bakery to the college and they're selling the bakery goods on campus. They are then using this money to buy generators.

**Parks:** I think the power of that example is how what seems to be an immense global issue was transformed into an action that gave students agency. The project allowed them to intervene in the conflict in a way that demonstrated actual material support was possible; that creating a strategy based on the real needs of Ukrainians based on the real resources available could produce real results. In my own classes, I have seen how students deeply felt sense that U.S. democracy is failing can be addressed by having them develop local interventions in terms of voting access or to support specific legislation around voting rights. It provides them a sense that well thought out actions can have results. And in the process, they learn again that change is the result of meshing your particular political

viewpoint with those of others to create a coalition that has the strength to actually protect democracy. In this way, they learn the limits of a purity that might provide personal comfort but does not produce actual change.

**Popović:** This is a very good point, especially when we are talking about democracy, which is something very dear to my heart. But it is also important when looking at other topics which are very big on academia, such as the environment, sustainability, or climate change. People who don't live in certain environments can have a very vague idea about how it is to live, to operate, in a certain environment. And from there, all kind of different assumptions come to the place. Of course, assumptions are not replacement for the facts, but bring somebody who is really passionate about women's rights to speak about Iran. Here comes this person who tells you the story that if you're jogging in Iran on the street and you are a woman, and even a scarfed, woman, you'll be easily stopped and frisked by the police because jogging looks suspicious. It looks like you just have escaped from your husband once again. So here you are with your very clear commitment to the woman's rights being exposed to the very different world. And here we are start focusing on if you want to change things, here is the strategic approach. We are no longer talking about equal pay for equal work on the whatever is the big issue at a college. Now you are talking about the basic right of women to exercise.

So, the reason why I think you're right about building the middle is if you are passionate about the issue and you are living into your own bubble, then you are very likely to sharpen your point of view or radicalize it. But if you're in constant touch with the people who are having actual human rights issues on the ground, then you're more likely to be grounded yourself in looking for real solutions. And the more you see it from the perspective of this person, the more you realize many elements of a nation need to join together to fix this issue. Your small group of true believers will never have the power of their own to correct this situation. This insight is, of course, impossible to gain by reading books. You need to be exposed to this person.

All the knowledge on UVA about historic cases of fighting for rights of women may actually be a very decent pile of useful things. But before you bring the person there, before a professor, academic postdoc or grad student gets in touch and really starts interacting with the person, then the person interacts with the group, you cannot understand the need and the real work of addressing that need. So once again, it's about more exposure, more practice, more human contact, which can't be replaced by quoting popular journals or looking at the data sets. Again, academic can help. Universities possess a tremendous level of knowledge. But if this knowledge stays in the library, then it is just a book on the library shelf. For most of real life advocates this knowledge is like there are bottles of water behind the closed doors, but here you are dying thirsty because you don't have a key.

**Parks:** I think that is a very powerful place to end our discussion. I want to add one final thought, though. One of the consistent themes in my work is how to navigate my own positionality in relationship to differing institutions and

communities. Your comment also reminds me that “positionality” is also a term that circulates in terms of national identity, either possessing or lacking such an affiliation and consequent set of rights. In your story, a student’s national context and understanding of political struggle is juxtaposed to that of an Iranian woman attempting to simply jog in public. You suggest that through interaction between these two individuals, a greater sense of what it means to work for human rights can be gained. That the necessity of coalitions to produce change will become evident to the U.S.-based student.

Moving to a larger framework, I also think that an international framework is necessary for many U.S.-based/born faculty to adopt as well. At different moments, I have spoken about how the university works to provide those with power, tenured professors, enough security so there appears to be no need to disrupt how power works. Often those comments have been focused on the need to reject such a framing when developing local community-based projects. There is perhaps a more urgent need to consider how our actions as professors, within our institutions, intersect with global atrocities that are occurring daily to populations on the wrong side of Western privilege. We need to consistently ask ourselves if our research and partnerships might address a local moment, but cause damage internationally. Sometimes this can be as immediate as our students understanding the personal risks their international student partners are facing, not asking them to talk about certain issues that can result in their expulsion from their university. We need to recognize our comfort with free speech might be irresponsible speech in another context. And certainly, when working with global advocates, we need to consider the full context of their work—how do their democratic beliefs intersect with issues such as LGBTQ or women’s rights.

But more broadly, I have come to understand that the initial work I did creating the Institute for Literacy, Literature, and Culture to transform the possibilities in my college was only half the work. In many ways, there should have been equal effort to build the coalitions of faculty, administration, and local community members to shift university funds, endowments, and investment policies that contradict the local claims to democracy, human rights, and justice. In many ways, to ultimately push against the comfort of being a traditional intellectual, you must understand your identity as global, as necessarily intersecting with communities that while distant, you still hold a responsibility to them. You must still challenge your university, your nation, to dismantle the structures of oppression. It’s only by operating at all these levels at one that you can be said to fighting for a democratic future.

And as I think is evident, I still have much to learn, and much work to do with others, such as yourself, to achieve that goal.