



*Inaugural Issue 2012*

## **Reimagining And Enacting Possibilities For Social Justice In The Academy**

Kelly T. Winters<sup>1</sup>

*University of Minnesota-Twin Cities*

Rebecca Ropers-Huilman

*University of Minnesota-Twin Cities*

Riyad Shahjahan

*Michigan State University*

Nana Osei-Kofi

*Iowa State University*

Nicholas A. Clegorne

*Louisiana State University*

Leah Hakkola

*University of Minnesota-Twin Cities*

### **Abstract**

This article explores the myriad ways in which it is possible to imagine knowing and doing social justice in higher education contexts. In addition, the article explores the relationship between social justice and reader's theater as a particular method for presenting autoethnographic data. In order to further understandings of knowing and doing social justice, the authors see a need for not only interdisciplinary collaboration between scholars and practitioners, but also the creation of texts that can be inclusive of multiple voices, modes, and genres. We seek to understand how ways of knowing and doing social justice can be made possible in multimodal and polyvocal texts. This article seeks to engage the imaginative, creative, and playful minds of its readers with a discussion of how these aspects of human experience are critical to the creation of socially just praxis in the academy. Finally, we ask our readers to consider the extent to which social justice work in higher education is hindered by the conventions of field-specific academic writing and argumentation styles. In an effort to highlight the interdisciplinary nature of social justice, this article uses theatrical and literary frameworks to draw attention to the artificial boundaries among art, philosophy, and social science texts.

---

<sup>1</sup> Please direct all correspondence related to this article to: Kelly T. Winters, University of Minnesota, 330 Wulling Hall, 86 Pleasant Street SE, Minneapolis MN 55455. She can also be reached electronically at [winte290@umn.edu](mailto:winte290@umn.edu).

## Prologue: Knowing, Doing Social Justice

How do the circumstances  
of social justice  
affect doing and knowing?  
What  
falls  
into  
place,  
is disrupted,  
in higher education contexts?

Knowing and doing *click*  
when we engage with higher education.  
Memory provokes imagination,  
Multiple ways of knowing are intertwined,  
Individuality and collectivity are honored.

*Click, click, click*

Social justice is connected, coupled with  
Learning the pain and beauty of agency in the world.

Doing critical, socially just work in the academy is often understood as particular pedagogies and classroom practices. While an understanding of social justice as informed practice in higher education teaching and learning environments is important, we believe that it is also important to consider the ways in which “doing” is related to “knowing.” When and under which circumstances do “doing” and “knowing” resonate with each other in higher education contexts? The nature of knowledge and of knowing in the academy continues to be deeply influenced by positivist understandings of science in which there are narrow definitions of truth, reality and objectivity (Lather, 2004; Barone, 2007). A second influence is movement toward the creation of neo-liberal organizational cultures in which colleges and universities are called on to behave in ways that are more efficient, accountable, excellent, and capable of doing more with less funding (Giroux, 2009; Bok, 2003; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Strathern, 2000; Readings, 1996) . To what extent is it possible to position socially just practice in higher education contexts

when organizational cultures continue to value an increasingly narrow definition of what counts as knowledge, knowing and productive action?

According to Adams, Bell and Griffin (2007), social justice in higher education aims to create an environment in which all individuals, regardless of race, religion, nationality, gender, sexual orientation or disability have equal and fair access and opportunity to participate in institutions of higher learning. Structures and processes that support social justice in higher education promote democratic principles, individual and critical agency and inclusive methods of involvement and engagement (Hackman, 2008). Ultimately, the goal of social justice in higher education is to create a space where identities are respected and a dual commitment to multiple ways of knowing and acting within the world are valued and celebrated (Hackman, 2008).

Teaching about social justice not only lends itself to recognition of multiple ways of knowing, but it also sheds light on the interplay between power, privilege and oppression with an underlying impetus of active social change (Adams, 2007; Griffin & Ouellett, 2007). This recognition is crucial to social justice frameworks in education because it deconstructs typical ways of knowing and seeing the world, while at the same time highlighting the injustices that pervade the societal systems of law, labor, housing, media and education (Hackman, 2005). It follows that applying this framework in higher education will facilitate the exploration of the role of knowledge, power and opportunity in the societal systems and institutions in which they are entrenched (Bell, Love, & Roberts, 2007).

Social justice initiatives compel those involved to question how societal structures relate to and influence understandings of personal identity and the role of agency as they relate to the external environment (Griffin & Ouellett, 2007). As Hackman (2005) asserts, "Understanding both micro and macro implications for content mastery draws from student experience, invites them into the knowledge construction process, and leads to a more student centered classroom" (p. 105). By deconstructing how macro systems affect and oppress the lived experience and agency of individuals, people can begin to understand the multifarious stories that they associate with their own identities, as well as the complexity that is necessary for developing truly reflective and inclusive personal narratives (Hackman, 2005).

Teaching for and with social justice principles in higher education in the United States has provided an alternative to the belief that one ultimate truth and reality exist (Hackman, 2008). Instead, this framework validates the vast spectrum of identities, ethnicities, races, religions and cultures that make up our increasingly diverse academic community. When applied to higher education, social justice frameworks create a way for students to problematize the traditional methods of producing and consuming knowledge, which is an important strategy

in teaching and learning as it reveals aspects of exclusion otherwise unrecognizable in everyday practice. Utilizing this approach in higher education can also help students identify the unique ways of defining themselves and their roles as critical agents of change (Hackman, 2008). A social justice framework supports critical inquiry, discourse and reflection by validating all forms of identity, background, personal narrative and social positioning (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Social justice in higher education provides an opportunity to develop a new kind of paradigm, one that is not typically endorsed in institutions of higher learning, but would be useful because it recognizes the fluidity of knowledge and identity, the effects of societal systems of oppression and the potential for personal and collective transformation (Adams, 2007; Gabel, 2002).

In order to understand the complexities of imagining the possibility for social justice in higher education environments, we designed a creative collaboration that explored the relationships between context, experience, agency, teaching and learning environments, and social justice. We met in an online environment and posed questions for each other related to the concept of reimagining and embodying possibilities for social justice in the academy. The questions led to an open-ended exploration of what possibilities are and could be within the academy. While each of us brought differing scholarly and action-based commitments to the group, the online dialog that emerged seemed to “click” with our shared interest in furthering social justice-oriented praxis and theoretical perspectives. As a result of our dialogs, the word “click” began to resonate with us because of the many myriad ways in which it can be used in the English language. Initially we were drawn to “click” as figure of speech, for example the phrase “when something clicks.” We were also drawn to the ways in which “click” is made to represent the process by which something or someone falls into a place or context. Understanding how one clicks with or in a particular context also implicates the processes through which thoughts and memories are formed. In other words, when we gave ourselves the creative writing prompt “write about a time when things ‘clicked’ for you in the academy,” we were inviting each other to share narratives of memories of places, people and contexts. The narratives that resulted from this prompt were explorations in language, story form, voice, tone, point of view, setting, characterization and genre. Finally, we were drawn to the word’s onomatopoeic qualities, or the ways in which “click” actually sounds like two objects coming into contact with each other. We chose to evoke the sound *click* because it adds an additional layer of theatricality to our collaboration. As a sound effect, *click* becomes yet another way in which we can communicate our memories of place, people, and context with our audience.

Winters and Ropers-Huilman wove the story threads presented in the online narratives into a script that could be performed in a reader’s theater format. This particular format

emphasizes voice and oral interpretation as a way to explore both particular concepts and the creative minds of audience members. The oral interpretive style that is unique to reader's theater is also a way in which it is possible to blur the boundaries between performance, conversation, dialog, and discussion (Saldaña, 2003). An early version of the reader's theater piece was performed by the authors at the 2011 Bergamo Conference on Curriculum Theory and Classroom Practice in Dayton, Ohio. During this performance, we collaborated to transform the conference space itself into a theatrical venue: session attendees were given playbills that explained the content of the play and the "cast of characters," and were also asked to sit in chairs that had been arranged around an implied stage in the center of the room. In this way, the conference space itself became a venue in which it was possible to consider how academic identities could be experienced both as personal memory stories and as performance.

This article re-constitutes, re-visits and re-contextualizes the performance script used at the Bergamo Conference presentation. It is our intention that the script might further open up dialog about the ways in which academic texts themselves reify particular ways of knowing and being in the world that can work against the goals of critical, socially just praxis. We believe that social justice in higher education is hindered by strict adherence to the conventions of field-specific academic writing and argumentation styles. In order to further both "knowing" and "doing" social justice, we see a need for not only interdisciplinary collaboration between scholars and practitioners but also the creation of texts that can be inclusive of multiple voices, modes, and genres. In the cast of characters listing and the five acts that follow, we invite our readers to think critically and creatively about what it might mean to "click" with social justice in higher education contexts. It is our intention that the re-presentation that follows also be a part of a consideration of the ways in which the artificial disciplinary separation of social science, performing arts, and literary studies are made to be important and meaningful in texts. As a result of our collaboration, and invitation to submit our reader's theater script as a journal article, we have found that our discussion is best captured through the following two questions: What comes from the representation of social scientific "data" as memory and imagination? In what ways might highlighting multiple voices, modes and genres make it possible to "see" how academic selves become re-presented in journal articles? Social science texts often represent the answers to research questions through thoughtful manipulation of the APA publication style. In our reader's theater script, our memories are represented through performances that show and tell stories of our academic selves.

### Cast of Characters

**Nana Osei-Kofi:** Mid-semester replacement instructor hired to teach an introductory women's studies course at an elite private college

**Rebecca Ropers-Huilman:** Professor at a public research university who has traveled to Guangzhou, China for an academic conference

**Riyad Shahjahan:** Professor teaching doctoral students about social justice issues and higher education

**Nik Cleghorne:** Residence life director at a public university that is grappling with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

**Kelly Winters:** Procrastination-prone Ph.D. student who is nostalgic about her time as an undergraduate at a Catholic women's college.

### ACT I

*Why higher education? In what ways are possibility and imagination circumscribed by the contingencies of history and place in academic settings?*

**NANA:** It was springtime and I was teaching an introductory Women's Studies class. I had taken over mid-semester for a faculty member on maternity leave. It was my first time teaching at an elite liberal arts institution. It was an encounter that made educational privilege tangible to me in a way that I had never experienced before. The students in my class came mostly from elite prep schools on the East Coast and the quality of their academic preparation was without question. When it came to writing, most of them could run circles around the majority of doctoral students I was teaching at another institution. What struck me the most was their sense of confidence: there was little doubt in their minds that if they wanted to do something, they could. In fact, the availability of resources, opportunity, and success in any chosen endeavor was what they expected of their lives. You might think that I am talking here about arrogance, but in fact, I am not. I am talking about a sense of being in a world that is responsive to needs. In this world, responsiveness is the norm, a place where the world and academy click...

**RIYAD:** ...How does the academy click for me? It is when I witness and serve others in terms of validating their subjugated experiences and/or subjugated knowledges. It clicks for me when the academy can be a means to nurture possibilities for the self-determination of diverse bodies. Catherine is an international student who has recently joined the doctoral program. In one of my informal conversations with her about her doctoral journey, I learned that she loved drawing, but

had stopped pursuing artwork because in her words, "I'm too busy with my doctoral work." According to Catherine, drawing would be a distraction and challenge to completing her doctoral program in time. Like many of her doctoral colleagues, she wanted to finish quickly and then get a job. Once she secured a position, she would then pursue what she wants. I recommended that she should pursue her artistic desires. Instead of delaying her doctoral work, art may actually enhance it. I would regularly check on her, inquiring if she had completed any artwork. When my time in the department came to an end, Catherine came to my farewell party and presented me a beautiful pencil drawing of a flower and a card with a note of gratitude for reminding and helping her reconnect with her artistic self.

**KELLY:** I spend most of my days writing, a process that involves staring at one of the various screens I have linked to my Dropbox account. My laptop's harddrive has begun making an ominous whirring noise, necessitating the creation of a complex system of backups. In addition to "the cloud," I sync my laptop to two external hard drives I have only half-jokingly titled "Plan B" and "Plan C." The "Plans" and "the cloud" are my defense against losing my entire identity as a PhD student: doc files, PDFs, metadata, eJournal access logons, email contacts . . .

I am nostalgic for a time when I was not obsessed with either data or preparing for its eminent demise. I used to love writing and getting lost in my thoughts. The evidence of this love currently resides in a box of hand-written journals that is buried in the back of my linen closet. When I think about them, I confront the memory that I used to feel creative and spontaneous. Now I worry about writing as productivity, aware that the meager 5 pages of "research" that I complete in a month will not cut it. At this rate, I will never finish my degree. What's worse is that I have numerous backups and backup to the backups that echo that message, over and over, each time I click the save button.

**NIK:** The clock blinks in my office 12:00...12:00...12:00 as I sit at my desk – I have not reset it since the power clicked out 48 hours earlier, during the hurricane. In actuality, it is 6:37pm Wednesday, August 31st, 2005. I've been at work all day taking the – now common-place – census of my 500 bed on-campus apartment complex (last head count 1,856 souls including parents, cousins, friends, dogs, cats, and snakes.). The clock on my cell phone's display clicks over to 6:38pm. I chuckle at my current task, laughing so that I don't cry. As a state employee of Louisiana in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, one of the worst natural and socio-political disasters in American history, I am tasked with creating a co-curriculum. As coastguard helicopters buzz my roof and land not 150 yards from my office, I sit: not filling sand bags, not

volunteering in the triage unit, field hospital or the makeshift morgues. But writing a co-curriculum.

**REBECCA:** I tried to reconnect with my sense of place as we drove past what looked to be endless skyscrapers towering over us in Guangzhou. Two students from Guangzhou University were taking me, a colleague, and a recent doctoral graduate back to the train station so we could return to Hong Kong. We had been engaged in a conference and discussions about potential partnerships for the previous three days, but our current interactions were with the students who had sat quietly away from the table in those discussions. Now, they were alone with their visitors from the United States. In the van was a rich interaction between tourists, academics, students, teachers, curious people who were interested in learning about each other's thinking and ways of life.

The skyscrapers loomed. Throughout our trip to Hong Kong and Guangzhou, various people made comments about how impressive these cities were – their buildings and streets accommodated millions of people. I was also impressed and overwhelmed. At one point, I looked at a row of skyscrapers that was full of apartments and realized that in all likelihood, someone died and someone moved in to that building every single day. People stacked on top of each other, moving into the space created by others for the purpose of housing, managing, or making money from people. Are we that replaceable?

## **ACT II**

*The way things are: To what extent is “university life” not what we hoped or bargained for?  
What comes from disillusioned or displaced ways of knowing and being?*

**KELLY:** I recently decided to re-read the journals that were buried at the back of my linen closet. In order to best channel the creative “me” that I was when I wrote them, I decided to dress for the part. I dug my pair of pink, vintage cateye glasses out of storage: the frames I found in my grandmother's button box, and had set with my prescription fifteen years ago. I wore those cateyes most days when I was an undergraduate, but have never bothered having the lenses updated as my eyesight has changed.

I put on the glasses so that I might attempt reading the journals. I lasted about 30 minutes before I had to take them off. I had forgotten that they pinched my ears, significantly reduced my peripheral vision, and had missing rhinestones. Worst of all, I have become far-sighted as I have aged. In order to read my old journals with the glasses I wore when I wrote them, I had to hold the journals close to my face, scrunch up my nose, and will my eyes to keep focus on the

scribbly handwriting. I felt old, exhausted, frustrated and disillusioned. I came to the realization that the rosy-colored sheen I sought and believed ought to have been true about my memories of creativity were not possible given the tools that I had to work with. When I took off the glasses, I realized that what I longed for was a return to a reality that perhaps never existed in the way in which I remember it.

**REBECCA:** To me, educational interactions are relational, individual, and even intimate. Yet, recent policy and practice suggest that we, as institutional representatives, are meant to produce better workers, distribute education more efficiently, and develop a nation, state and citizenry that can “compete in a global economy.” I am struggling to imagine the relationships and intimacy in that. This rhetoric challenges my definition of what it means to make a difference in community, to live in a meaningful way, to relish beauty and not just productivity. The skyscrapers are efficient. They are hard, and square, and carry the same color throughout their exterior.

I hold as true that each of us has an opportunity or responsibility to make a difference in the world. I want to find paths toward living a meaningful life.

**NIK:** Living a meaningful life? It’s been about a year and a half since *Learning Reconsidered* was published; I have been told that it takes The Student Learning Imperative to “the next level.” As a response to this imperative, we have been asked to utilize the “enhanced resident connections” that we have developed through the post-hurricane censuses to operationalize learning outcomes within our residential life curriculum. In other words, measure the quality of interactions you have had. Looking for something to impress my boss, I pull *Learning Reconsidered* off my shelf.

Are you serious? “Enhanced student connections?” The setting has removed the mundanely day-to-day interactions within the residence halls to the point that the request now seems ridiculous. As I futilely flip through the pages of the essay, my eyes fall onto one of the overarching concept statements in the first several pages: “Here we work to bring our terminology, and our way of understanding what student affairs professionals contribute to student outcomes, in line with the finding of current learning research and with our empirical observations about how learning occurs among today’s students.” My heart breaks. Maybe it is because I finally let the weight of political and human tragedy catch up to me. Maybe it is because I recognize that the statement I have just read so callously separates “us” from “them,” “student” from “teacher,” “valid” and “not yet so.” Or maybe, just maybe, my despair comes from

the realization that as I read the same text months before I had jotted "YES!" next to the passage.

**RIYAD:** . . . Yes, it's fall. I am both anxious and nervous as I walk through the hallway towards my first class in social justice theory. I had a chance to look through the class roster, so I have some sense of who to expect. But names, photographs, and majors, hardly tell us the whole story.

As I walk into the classroom, I notice Kim. She is sitting alone in the classroom. I identify and assume that she is a woman of color based on her appearance. Later on in the break, Kim came in with a pink form for me to sign. The form identifies her as a student with a hearing impairment. I realized that Kim was the "unexpected" in my class.

During that class, I learned that Kim has chosen to take my social justice theory course hoping that it would cover ideas and theories that were not covered in her own discipline. During the first couple of weeks Kim remained silent.

After a couple of weeks, Kim made an appointment with me to discuss her final paper. She seemed concerned about finalizing a topic as she had "too many ideas" and time was running out. As our discussions progressed, I came to learn about Kim's struggles with growing up White, although she didn't look like her White parents who had adopted her from Asia. Her adulthood was further complicated by a hearing disability. Throughout our conversation, she kept referring to how she always felt like an "oddball" in society. She decided to come to grad school to make sense of herself.

I suggested that her final paper could provide a path to heal somewhat from what she had experienced in her life. Through our conversation, I could sense a struggle in Kim's body language. In one way, she was hoping that I would tell her "exactly what she should do," and in turn get good grades in the course. At the end of our conversation, she left my office, frustrated, and in tears. I remember going to my colleagues and wondering if I had made a mistake in re-opening her wounds. I also questioned whether it was inappropriate for us to discuss her personal life.

At the end of the semester I finally received her paper. I was impressed by her writing and analysis. She effectively tied various theoretical pieces with narratives of her life in order to articulate the limitations of social justice theory. The paper received an A+. It was one of the best pieces I ever read from a graduate student. In my feedback, I highly recommended that one day she should publish her paper. To my great amazement, her course paper, after much revision, was published. Today, it's a paper that I use in my course....

### ACT III

*What are alternative and complementary ways of being in the academy? What are the perils and possibilities for engaging in such alternative ways of knowing and being?*

**KELLY:** The year is 1997. The place is the St. Kate's, a Catholic women's college. I am an undergraduate English major, and I look fabulous. I have teased, ratted, backcombed and sprayed my hair into a beehive up-do. The red streaks of Manic Panic "electric lava" operate as a contrast to the purple false eyelashes that I have glued to my face. Whenever I blink my eyelashes rub against the lenses of the pink rhinestone cateye glasses.

The woods that surround St. Kate's are perfect for midnight poetry and music slams. My friends and I gather there on Friday nights so that we can party softly with our flashlights, notebooks, guitars and imported French cigarettes. We play at being the Midwest's answer to the West Coast riot grrrls scene, with a vague homage to Gertrude Stein's Left Bank Paris added in for good measure. We read our poems and rock out to feminism. Acoustic renditions of punk rock tunes are played quietly enough to evade the attention of Sister Mary John Deere, the College's groundskeeper.

I step out the back door of Stanton Hall, pausing to see if anyone is watching. Satisfied that I am not being followed, I walk into the stand of tall trees and brush that surrounds the College's south border. The lights from my residence hall fade as I make my way into the trees. I move slowly, giving my eyes time to adjust to the light of the full moon as it moves between the branches.

I step into a gopher hole. My ankle twists as I fall with great aplomb into the brush.

My heart rings in my ears, and I am aware of my breathing. A twig snaps behind me.

Then another. I panic. I've been caught. I lay on the ground convinced that it is only seconds until the College's groundskeeper finds me. I am the bookish Ichabod Crane, waiting for Sister Mary John Deere to emerge from the woods on her ghoulish lawn tractor, a confiscated six-pack of beer dangling from her hand.

The moment I fear never comes. Instead, I hear the giggles and *shush*-es of my friends as they make their way through the trees, guitar cases banging against the underbrush.

"Hey! Over here!" I whisper loudly. They stop in their tracks, giggles fading into looks of fear. "It's me!"

Margo laughs,

**REBECCA: (AS MARGO)** What are you doing on the ground?

**KELLY:** Hiding from Sister Mary John Deere.

**REBECCA: (AS MARGO)** You scared us! She's in bed by now, don'tcha think? Besides, I don't think she hears very well, what with the lawnmower—Hey! *Nice* hair! How did you get that to stay up?

**KELLY:** I touch my beehive in a moment of self-consciousness, making sure that it has held its shape and height.

We continue to make our way through the trees to a small clearing that gives the illusion of seclusion. As I look around at my friends, I see that we are all doing our best to perform the identity of artists, musicians and English majors: Margo is wearing her black Ramones t-shirt over a studded leather belt, short skirt and thick-soled, lace-up boots that stretch up to her knees. Rachel is decked out in a vintage leopard print coat over a pair of black leggings, and Jenna is in her favorite men's paisley print pajamas, a pair she found in the dollar-per-pound bin at Goodwill. We all look fabulous.

**NANA:** I often ponder what the world would look like if we all grew up with experiences that taught us that anything is possible.

The campus was in uproar as several cross-burnings were reported. Since I was teaching in the Women's Studies department, I felt as though I could not in good conscience simply continue with the course as planned. This was a real life situation happening in our community that spoke directly to many of the intersectional issues of oppression that we had discussed in class in the weeks prior. We simply had to engage with it. I spoke to the students. They agreed. We spent a lot of time discussing the events of the past few days, their feelings about them, and how these events tied into larger macro-level social, political, and economic issues.

The students wanted to take some form of action. They pooled their respective skills and decided to make a film about issues of social justice on both a macro and a micro level as a way to stimulate discussion on campus. It was in bringing this project together that I saw the themes of privilege, creativity, community building, intentionality, commitment, and impact come together to foster transformation.

As a faculty member, I was in a place where I didn't have to hesitate in changing my course to make it responsive to the present. My students had a sense of ownership of their academic experience and their lives that allowed us to engage with the issues at hand as a community. And so the work began. One of the students in the class went directly to the Dean, knocked on her door and asked for money to complete the project. Another made sure we had access to an

editing lab during all hours of the day and night as time was of the essence. Tasks were divided up. Readings were incorporated into the project. At every turn, what we wanted and needed was made available to us. The students worked long hours and it was clear to me that through this project they gained an understanding of the issues I had originally intended to engage in class, in ways that were far more meaningful than any discussion I could have facilitated or paper I could have assigned. It was a process that was self-reflexive and allowed students the space to recognize and engage with their own privilege.

The film was completed and we had an opening night where community members, parents, university administrators, and others showed up to watch the film and to discuss the issues it raised. It was an evening filled with excitement, emotion, substantive intergenerational discussion, and a call to action. The growth that these students experienced in a relatively short amount of time was noteworthy. Several changed their academic and personal plans for the future as a result of their involvement with the project. The office of residence life on campus decided to use their film as part of their training for new hall directors, as a way to engage with issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality in higher education.

**RIYAD:** Why is it that people in the academy feel the pressure to let go of their multiple ways of knowing and being? I share Kim and Catherine's stories not because they are micro-events, unrelated to larger structures, but because they are about nurturing possibilities. They are about validating the multiple selves that we hold and that we may let go of because of the domination of our "academic selves" that are exclusively tied to the mind and particular material outcomes, such as grades, jobs, and tenure. What is the real cost to our spirits in letting go of the chef, artist, parent or activist in each of us?

#### **ACT IV**

*What would it take for the academy to embrace multiple ways of knowing and being? How does one sustain a meaningful self within discourses of competition, hierarchy, efficiency, privatization, managerialism and scarcity?*

**NANA:** My time in that class clicked because there were no barriers that hindered my ability to engage in responsive teaching. Things clicked because I had students that were academically prepared in ways that all students should have a right to be prepared. It clicked because we had a supportive administration that did not hesitate to invest in new ideas, in students, in creativity, and in a commitment to social justice. It clicked because there was a sense of community, belonging, and shared responsibility for what was going on in the community of which we were

a part. It clicked because there was a shared belief in possibility. This experience to me, maybe more than any other I have been a part of, exemplified what higher education can and should be about. It was about transformation, growth, change, opportunity, shared learning, and making a difference.

**RIYAD:** The academy clicks for me when the surge of energy is here and now; when it allows people to express, enjoy, and nurture their multiple ways of being, whether it be a cook, a musician, a painter, an activist, or someone who has pain to express. The academy clicks for me, when it is a place where we do not divorce who we are in terms of our multiple selves and can embrace all of them. It clicks for me when we learn and realize that academic norms are concrete or real only because we perform, repeat, and enact those norms in our everyday lives. We need to interrupt those norms so that we can allow the crevices of our multiple selves to enter the academic space and let it shine as well as nurture those around us. I am not suggesting that we have a universal recipe and everybody embodies them, but that structures are reproduced not through abstract forces, but through our everyday actions and intentions. How might norms and structures be transformed, become “freedom towards” ways of being in the academy?

**KELLY:** As a scholar, practitioner and graduate student, I am manipulated by my desire to work toward social justice outcomes. I want to believe that by consuming the passage of time, or believing that with age comes experience and wisdom, that I will be able to *know*, *do*, and *capitalize* on the possibilities for social justice. From this perspective, I should be able to act with reason and responsiveness by recalling some of my fondest memories from the past and with informed, pragmatic reflection transform and work them into actionable “best practices” for social justice.

The problem is that memory is better suited to storytelling than Truth-telling. In order to explore the relationship between personal memory, reflection, and action, one needs to see oneself as the protagonist of one’s own life. I want to see myself as the plucky heroine who understood undergraduate life as a series of creative possibilities and opportunities for transgression. Reflecting on these memories allows a kind of (re)imagining of higher education as places and spaces that are, or have the capacity to be, something “other” than what they are. These imaginings, in theory at least, provide a pathway for higher education to be re-imagined, transformed, made different. The challenge is that memory can sometimes be tinted by rose-colored glasses. I find myself wearing a pair of cataracts that no longer fit the situation at hand. I

want the glasses to continue to be useful, and, by extension, for my memories to have some semblance of integrity.

I begin to manipulate and re-tell the story so as to save face. I want to be understood as having the age, wisdom and experience to “do” social justice. My motivations for retelling have now changed, and by extension, so has the story. In the context of a conference presentation or a journal article, perhaps I want to end the tale by bending the moral of the story so that it fits into some broader higher educational success or progress agenda. This story might conclude with a “full-circle” moment in which I have been transformed into a social justice-minded scholar and practitioner. As a graduate student, I want my memories to communicate to others that my past experiences are sufficient and “correct” preparation for a career of social justice work.

**NIK:** My eyes settle on a quote from Yates that reads “Education is Not the Filling of a Pail, but the Lighting of a Fire. I feel a disconnect. I jot down the following words that I will still have in my desk in 2012. *What happens to educators who attempt to justify themselves by something other than their own means?* As I make my note I can’t help but feel that I, along with my peers, have created a self-referential means of knowing which suggests that “we” know best how to educate “them.” I sigh as I put pen to paper. “Title: Holistic Outcomes...objective 1” and the lunacy of that statement alone overwhelms me.

**REBECCA:** Parker Palmer advises us to listen as our lives speak. And, bell hooks describes how learning is not meant to be comfortable as it is grounded in both relationship and change. Staying open to learning despite discomfort and unease is where I find the greatest fulfillment in the academy. It’s where I find the greatest meaning and purpose.

When we get to the train station, we decide to have lunch together. The conversation turns to what it is like to be a student at Guangzhou University, or to work and learn at universities in the United States. We learn about living conditions, relationships between faculty and students, relationships between universities and the government, and the many purposes of tertiary education. We laugh together. The students advise us on what to order and translate those orders into Chinese for the waitress. We offer to help each other in the future in any way we can. We are far from the skyscrapers.

In my ideal academic world, participants and communities have an insatiable desire to remain open to each other, to learn from each other, to see each other’s strengths, beauty, and curiosities. Our practice is centered on opening questions and hearts. Minds and imaginations. Relationships and action. All in an effort to understand each other and make our collective stronger, richer, more beautiful. I’m not sure how to do this when we live in skyscrapers.

**ACT V**

**RIYAD:** How do I make meaning,

**KELLY:** . . . create curriculum,

**REBECCA:** . . . create knowledge,

**ALL:** . . . in community?

**NANA:** Through making sure people – including me – have what they need.

**NIK:** Through destabilizing the power dynamics and creating new academic norms

**RIYAD:** . . . that are created only through our daily practices.

**KELLY:** Through honoring our individual and collective memories

**REBECCA:** . . . as they simultaneously make us who we are and shape our knowledge.

**NIK:** How do the particular circumstances of social justice in higher education contexts affect your knowing and doing?

**KELLY:** [*Looks at audience member, stage right*] Or yours?

**NANA:** [*Focuses attention on a group of audience members sitting stage left*] Or yours?

**REBECCA:** [*Pauses for a beat*] Or yours?

**RIYAD:** [*Looks to the reader of this journal article*] Or yours?

**ALL:** What are your stories of knowing and doing social justice in higher education?

## References

- Adams, M. (2007). Pedagogical framework for social justice education. In M. Adams, L. A. Bell, P. Griffin (Eds.), *Teaching for diversity and social justice* (pp. 15-33). New York: Routledge.
- Adams, M., Bell, L. A., & Griffin, P. (2007). *Teaching for diversity and social justice*. New York: Routledge.
- Barone, T. (2007). A return to the gold standard? Questioning the future of narrative construction as educational research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(2), 1-17.
- Bell, L. A., Love, B. J., & Roberts, R. A. (2007). Racism and white privilege curriculum and design. In M. Adams, L. A. Bell, P. Griffin (Eds.), *Teaching for diversity and social justice* (pp. 124-144). New York: Routledge.
- Bok, D. (2003). *Universities in the marketplace: The commercialization of higher education*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gabel, S. (2002). Some conceptual problems with critical pedagogy. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 32(2), 177-199.
- Giroux, H. (2009). Democracy's nemesis: The rise of the corporate university. *Cultural Studies & Critical Methodologies*, 9(5), 669-695.
- Griffin, P., & Ouellett, M. (2007). Facilitating social justice education courses. In M. Adams, L. A. Bell, P. Griffin (Eds.), *Teaching for diversity and social justice* (pp. 89-113). New York: Routledge.
- Hackman, H. W. (2005). Five essential components for social justice education. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 38(2), 103-109.
- Hackman, H. W. (2008). Broadening the pathway to academic success: The critical intersection of social justice education, critical multicultural education, and universal instructional design. In J. L. Higbee, E. Goff (Eds.), *Pedagogy and student services for institutional transformation: Implementing universal design in higher education* (pp. 25-48). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Center for Research on Developmental Education and Urban Literacy.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? In E. Taylor, D. Gillborn, G. Ladson-Billings (Eds.), *Foundations of critical race theory in education* (pp. 17-36). New York: Routledge.
- Lather, P. (2004). This is your father's paradigm: Government intrusion and the case of qualitative research in education. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(1), 15-34.
- Readings, B. (1996). *The university in ruins*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Saldaña, J. (2003). Dramatizing data: A primer. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9(2), 218-236.
- Slaughter, S., & Rhoades, G. (2004). *Academic capitalism and the new economy: Markets, state and higher education*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Strathern, M. (2000). *Audit cultures: Anthropological studies in accountability, ethics, and the academy*. New York: Routledge.

**JCTP Copyright Statement:**

Authors of accepted manuscripts assign to the *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis* (JCTP) the right to publish and to distribute those texts electronically, to archive those texts, and to make them permanently retrievable electronically. Authors retain the copyright of their texts, unless otherwise noted. JCTP is produced by the Social Justice Program in the School of Education at Iowa State University.