But Is It Activist?: Interpretive Criteria for Activist Scholarship in Higher Education

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Abstract: The palpable dissatisfaction and concerns of students, staff, and faculty—often in the form of protests and demonstrations—continue to challenge contemporary college and university campuses. Practical considerations notwithstanding, what remains are questions regarding how higher education

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scholars can align their research with broader sociopolitical aims to engage postsecondary education and its stakeholders in organized resistance. In this article, we offer interpretive criteria by which the study of higher education can better understand, and postsecondary researchers can more deliberately engage in, the production of activist scholarship.

Colleges and universities in the United States—as well as the nation itself—find themselves again amidst the palpable dissatisfaction and concern of their primary stakeholders. Students, staff, and faculty have remained engaged in various forms of civic participation (e.g., labor unionization and organized resistance), on-campus and beyond, with the explicit intent to transform their institutions as well as society. Most evident were the events transpiring at the University of Missouri (and elsewhere) during the 2015–2016 academic year, wherein Black students organized against the pervasive racism they experienced on-campus. Scholars documented approximately 80 postsecondary institutions, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities as well as Hispanic Serving Institutions, that issued demands from student collectives, many of which provided prognoses for improving the campus climate and students' experiences (The Demands, 2015). While some individuals may assume that the current unrest is a result of the election of Donald Trump to be President of the United States, most of this unrest began years prior within broader organizing collectives and social movements (e.g., Occupy Wall Street and the Movement for Black Lives), which also manifested themselves on campus. In fact, for decades, college and university students have organized around issues of racial justice, income and debt disparities, mass incarceration and prison divestment, abuses of power by law enforcement and the unjust killing of unarmed citizens, as well as gender and sexual violence. What remains throughout are questions regarding how higher education scholars can align their research with political aims to engage postsecondary education, and postsecondary stakeholders, in organized resistance.

We are in a contemporary era centered on "wokeness," in which "being 'woke' is meant to encourage a heightened level of consciousness both locally and transnationally regarding societal ills and the need to unabashedly name and dismantle inequitable power structures and their disproportionately negative effects on minoritized peoples" (Association for the Study of Higher Education [ASHE], 2018, p.1). Yet, in this era, scholars often appraise and contest other individuals' critical consciousness because a profound sense of urgency and accountability for the production of scholarship of consequence has arisen within our field. On the whole, it would appear that the study of higher education is attempting to do what it can to be more than an expression of the times, but an analysis of them. One need not look any further than the themes and presidential addresses of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) within the last two years, or the various special

issues of higher education journals centering activism and social justice in recent years. In an effort to add to the growing chorus of responses as well as provide some direction for the field, we offer suggestions and concepts to guide our understanding and our work around activist scholarship. By activist scholarship we refer to research co-constructed, informed by, and produced to inform sociopolitical actions of people in struggle.

We offer an explicit conceptual and methodological framework for better understanding and interpreting activist scholarship in higher education. More concretely, we offer conceptual framing, interdisciplinary grounding, and interpretive criteria by which higher education scholarship can be understood as activist. We begin by first introducing a series of guiding questions to serve as the broad conceptual basis for understanding the relationship between activism and scholarship.

Scholarly Purpose

Through this article, we aim to make some conceptual sense of higher education research in relation to the broader sociopolitical climate and its manifestations in contemporary college and university life. The purpose of our scholarly article is to delimit and provide some prescriptions and suggestions for interpreting, and perhaps producing, activist scholarship in the study of higher education. At a base level, our article engages with the basic question of what constitutes activist scholarship, from which we further consider the following interrelated questions to guide our thinking:

1. What is the conceptual relationship between scholarship and activism in the study of higher education?
2. What existing literatures, within and beyond the field of higher education, help conceptually frame activist scholarship?
3. How is activist scholarship aligned within discourses of knowledge production within the study of higher education?
4. By what criteria can higher education researchers broadly interpret scholarship as activist?

These four questions lead us to a preliminary formulation of how, as higher education researchers, we might move forward with the intention to engage in the production of activist scholarship. To begin, we first engage our process of deliberation. Then, we discuss underlying presumptions and provide definitional clarifications from related discourses adjacent to our conceptual focus. Next, we engage existing literatures to conceptually frame our understandings of activism and scholarship, first separately and then in relation to one another. Then, we engage the questions of insufficiency with regard to scholarship in which activism is a phenomenon of interest. Finally, we

offer several criteria by which activist scholarship in higher education can be interpreted, evaluated, and produced.

THE ISSUE OF ANSWERABILITY

Upon undertaking the challenge of this article, we were forced to experience pauses and halting breaks in our attempt to produce something of substance within a relatively short period. Doing so engendered discomfort, more for some than others, especially given the *de facto* pressures of publishing—and doing so often—within our field. But, there was something more; an answerability that required us to "insert *space* into time" (Tuck, 2016, p. xii) and reach beyond an otherwise formulaic approach to the writing about the topic of activist scholarship in higher education. By answerability we are referring to Patel's (2016) construction of how educational researchers explicitly articulate the ways in which their work "speaks to, with, and against other entities" (p. 73). Patel, in writing specifically about processes of decolonization, identified aspects of (social) responsibility, accountability, and engaging in an exchange *between* entities rather than from the researcher outward as additional dimensions of answerability. In addition, there are three specific domains to which education researchers are answerable: learning, knowledge, and context. Answerability in these domains constitutes education research's ability to serve 1) learning as way of materially altering *how* and *for what* purposes research is done; 2) knowledge in its pursuit rather than its possession or as means of production; and 3) context by intentionally situating the pursuit of knowledge—for purposes of learning—within the educational location(s) one intends to change.

As higher education researchers, we determined our answerability extends past the academy and resides most squarely with those about whom much of our own work seeks to honor: the people. For purposes of this article, we are most answerable to grassroots organizers and intellectuals, their rights, humanity, and the values around which everyday practices of resiliency and resistance are transmitted. We understood these communities and values to exist both within and beyond traditional boundaries of colleges and universities. In fact, the foundations for what we will define as activist scholarship are philosophically and epistemologically rooted in intellectual communities marginalized within, adjacent to, and squarely outside of traditional academic contexts. Our answerability *within* postsecondary institutions specifically, however, is largely related to context. The knowledge we pursued to produce this article is inseparable from the postsecondary context(s) from which most of it emerges. It is situated within the often-prescriptive academic mores governing scholarly work within academe, which we later argue must be altered if not also dismantled. We further argue the case that

higher education researchers seriously consider emotionally and materially divesting from particular dimensions of academic life.

As we wrote and revised drafts of this article, we learned to consider the halting breaks of collaboration and peer-review as productive interruptions to our original approach (Patel, 2016; Shahjahan, 2014). Of course, the task in front of us was not insignificant, but in many ways herculean. There were several presumptions, that we invite to be considered as conceptual questions, embedded in our effort to understand the meanings constructed around ideas of both scholarship and activism. The degree to which the terms "scholarship" and "activism" are perceived by some (and therefore should be considered) as mutually exclusive poses a significant challenge in determining whether 1) activism informs scholarship; 2) scholarship informs activism; or 3) scholarship, tactically speaking, is a form of activism itself. For scholars whose work concerns itself with identifying and redressing various social inequities, the separation of the terms may feel unnecessary and semantic. Nevertheless, we intend to explicitly engage the discursive tensions between scholarship and activism, specifically within the study of higher education, and respond to discourses concerning the relationship between the two as often separate but related phenomena. An adjacent debate, which is engaged on a very limited basis below, is whether researchers whose scholarly publications broadly focused on issues of equity and social justice are, themselves, activists. Instead, our primary focus will be on framing activist scholarship in relation to its perceivable political intentions and impacts of higher education research. We consider activist scholarship in relation to efforts for systemic and structural change, on campus, but especially in other adjacent milieus within which inequity remains pervasive. We also focus on providing several criteria to help guide (and recursively assess) how we as higher education scholars can operationalize our production of knowledge to *be* activist.

DEFINITIONAL CLARIFICATIONS BETWEEN ADVOCACY AND ACTIVISM

For purposes of clarification, we must also address the question of scholarship as advocacy. We neither conflate nor consider synonymous or interchangeable the concepts of advocacy and activism. As evidenced by recent higher education scholars in Perna's (2018) edited volume, *Taking It to the Streets: The Role of Scholarship in Advocacy and Advocacy in Scholarship*, advocacy is a critical dimension toward advancing equity through the development of evidence-based policy decisions. Still, advocacy and activism are as distinctive as they are mutually constitutive. Although some variation in interpretation is offered across contributors, Perna's overarching definition of advocacy is borrowed from social psychology (Akhtar & Wheeler, 2016). Advocacy is defined by two rhetorical distinctions: proclamation and

persuasion. Advocacy as proclamation is perhaps a commonly understood definition, which involves articulating a particular position with regard to one's values or views on an issue whether inherently supported by data, research, or evidence. As persuasion, Perna (2018) wrote, advocacy "suggests willingness to exchange different viewpoints, debate or defend the nature of underlying data and research, and even change a conclusion in light of new data or research" (p. 8). Within a policy arena, such definitions are contextually appropriate and even useful for helping higher education scholars make sense of the process by which research and evidence can inform, contest, and even confirm the assumptive perspectives of policymakers. Contributors to the volume engage multiple ways research has the potential to influence decision-making in ways consistent with an individual's (or a collective's) social and political interests. At minimum, as Marginson (2018) argued, one's personal interests (i.e., the foundational basis for advocacy) undeniably inform their research decisions and, therefore, influence policy that is informed by the one's research findings. More fully, explicit perspectives on advocacy (and activism to an extent) at the center of one's research agenda and "public scholarship" are additionally offered by other notable colleagues (e.g., Bensimon, 2018; Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Harper, 2018; Rhoades, 2018).

Usefulness notwithstanding, the framework of advocacy presents two limitations of insufficiency for our purposes. First, while evidence-based advocacy in policy formulation is important (and should not be diminished!), such work remains largely confined to projects of reformation. By reformation we refer to the intention and process by which negotiations from *within* existing structures and institutions invested in oppressive asymmetrical relationships of power take place. Such negotiations generally require, as a starting position, a deferential approach to prevailing social and political realities to which incremental and moderate improvements can be made. Secondly, activism, which we engage with more definitional precision below, is distinct in that its worldviews, advocacy positions, and actions originate from and extend to venues well beyond academic and policy arenas. In our offering an operational definition of activist scholarship below, the aforementioned distinctions are important to consider. These distinctions provide us the means by which to differentiate advocacy from activism and therefore advocacy *in* scholarship from activist scholarship.

CONCEPTUALLY FRAMING THE ACTIVIST AND THE SCHOLAR

Through our first question, we ask, *What is the conceptual relationship between scholarship and activism in the study of higher education*? At the foundation of our analysis we were forced to ponder, with serious consideration, the question: What constitutes activist scholarship? Our contemplation led

to multiple other questions, most of which are beyond the scope of this article. However, in returning to our first exploratory question, we use this section to engage the conceptual foundations of activism *and* scholarship, first separately and then in relation to one another.

At the outset, at least one determination regarding the ostensible adjective, *activist*, and the noun, *scholarship*, could be made: their meanings are highly subjective, often conditional, and widely contested. Although this could quite easily be reduced to the ongoing social construction of meaning, particularly with language and accepted cultural practices, we have chosen to situate the subjectivity of the terms within broader sociopolitical, historical, and genealogical contexts. To begin, we found it useful to go to the source of the discourse now permeating higher education research in a way not seen since its introduction to our then understudied field in the late 1960s and early 1970s. We were required to seek operational definitions beyond our most familiar literature bases, and specifically toward the discipline of sociology, which has long studied activism and social movements as phenomena of interest. In particular, D'Antonio (1969) provided definitional grounding for the activist and the scholar, for which the author offered:

> . . . an activist is an individual who is interested in seeing that his ideological orientation toward the affairs of the world has influence upon these affairs, either to see that the status quo is maintained, or that changes are brought about in the system, or even that the system is changed. In a narrow sense, he is consciously aware of his ideological commitments and of their action implications, and he moves in some way toward the achievement of his objectives. (p. 2)

D'Antonio (1969) further suggested that ideological awareness is not always achievable within systems of broad consensus, which can often obscure personal recognition of one's own activism. Deductively, and according to the author, activism refers to the taking of action to effect social change, which the author suggests can either seek to disrupt or reinforce existing power relations (i.e., status quo). This perspective follows a normative logic in which advocates and activists, regardless of their social position in relation to power, are presented in a false equivalency. Furthermore, though a useful frame for similar approaches in higher education research (e.g., issues of free speech on campus), such a perspective obscures the relationships of power often undergirding activism as a form of resistance to oppressive systems and structures. Therefore, we deliberately shift from wholly adopting this perspective and confine activism to an intentionally narrower definition. We believe activism consists of actions directed at resisting (including the maintenance of existing struggles to ensure they do not worsen) and altering historical and contemporary hegemonic relationships of power, ultimately

toward advancing equity and social justice for marginalized peoples. Conversely, we also believe actions seeking to reinforce existing systems and relationships of power (e.g., ableism, classism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc.) are merely a continued exercise of oppressive domination. To label the preservation of power asymmetries at the foundation of social inequity as activist is not only ahistorical and disingenuous but profoundly disrespectful to people in struggle.

The scholar, however, D'Antonio (1969) noted:

> ...is one who seeks to pursue knowledge, to systematize and possibly to share knowledge with others, in a disinterested way. The scholar may be (perhaps must be) aware that knowledge can be translated into practical uses, but as scholar he is concerned only with pursuing, acquiring, systematizing, and sharing knowledge about something. The first point I would make then is that the very act of sharing knowledge draws the scholar into a close affinity to activism. Because knowledge is or can be for something. (p. 2)

Although D'Antonio acknowledged the separate vocations between activists and scholars, their closing point regarding the "close affinity" should not be missed. In fact, the point of scholarship being *for* something is foundational to our framing of the concept of activist scholarship. This is simply to say that the production of knowledge[1] (i.e., scholarship) is—or at least can be, as the author suggests—political, whether it is intentional. That is not to suggest the politicization of knowledge (and its production) by entities other than the scholar alone determine whether it should be considered "activist." Instead, *how* scholarship is explicit in its intention to be political, in accordance to our operational definition, foremost determines whether scholarship may be considered activist.

Thus far, our concept of activist scholarship broadly refers to counter-hegemonic knowledge production (Gramsci, 1971), which we further define as scholarship that explicitly confronts, challenges, and critiques hegemonic epistemologies, practices, research paradigms, and worldviews. Employing scholarship as a tactic of counter-hegemonic knowledge production *can* function as a deliberate act with political intent and impact to effect social change. In this way, such scholarship could be deemed activist in its own right. As Lempert (2001) wrote, " ...activism need not be an activity comple-

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[1]We acknowledge the use of knowledge production is a colonial and neoliberal construct, which not only commodifies the pursuit of knowledge (i.e., research) and situates it within competitive hierarchies, but also furthers anthropocentric definitions of knowledge as existing only when it is discovered (see Patel, 2016, pp. 77–80). Because what often constitutes scholarship is also framed in colonial and neoliberal ways, for which it is recognized and validated through peer-review and other publishing mechanisms, we have chosen to remain consistent in our logic for purposes of advancing our argument.

menting scholarship; it can inhere in scholarship itself. Although ideas are not self-implementing, they do matter, and scholarship can be a mechanism for resisting unjust change and advancing justice" (p. 26). However, we are left to provide some greater precision in grounding our definition of activist scholarship, which we again derive from literature outside the study of higher education.

Activist Scholarship and Engaging Contradictions

Pursuant of our second question, *What existing literatures help conceptually frame activist scholarship?*, we again turn elsewhere to conceptually frame activist scholarship. Synonymously referred to as activist research, activist scholarship has a longstanding tradition within the social sciences (Hale, 2008, 2008; Harding, 2005; Lassiter, 2005; Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Napels, 2003; Price, 2004; Sanford & Asale, 2006; Tsing, 2005). According to Hale (2008), activist research refers to methods through which scholars 1) affirm a political alignment with communities and organized groups of people in struggle; and 2) engage them in recursive dialogue to shape every aspect of the research process (i.e., from conceptualization to data collection to interpretation and validation and, finally, the dissemination of research findings).

Such an approach has often encompassed an array of specific methodologies, including but not limited to: action research, participatory action research, collaborative research, engaged research, grounded theory, and other public intellectual work. Activist research is dually committed to and exists in the tension between "critical scholarly production" (Hale, 2008, p. 104) and the cultures of people in struggle within and beyond academic settings. In this way, activist research within the social sciences is accountable for (and answerable to) constituencies and practices generally falling outside the structures of academia. Although questions regarding scholarly significance, rigor, and theoretical advancement of activist research may emanate from fellow researchers, funders, and promotion and tenure committees, additional questions with regard to its usefulness for advancing contemporary political struggles underway must also be considered. The latter is rarely if ever a consideration of conventional research, which does not often center the relational processes of knowledge production (see Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Tsing, 2005). Building upon the abovementioned definitional characteristics, we offer perspective to directly address the concerns of colleagues more skeptical than we about *why* activist scholarship matters.

The practical points of the matter involve both process and product with regard to activist scholarship's contributions. As Hale (2008) posited, the aims of activist scholarship are:

. . . to enact an alternative way of doing research that attempts to contribute the social good and to modestly advance the frontiers of knowledge, while training a bright light of critical scrutiny on the inequities of university-based knowledge production and attempting to ameliorate these inequities through the research process itself. (p. 23)

Unlike most forms of traditional scholarship, which are foregrounded in pursuing and significantly advancing new knowledge as their primary concern, activist scholarship seeks to make social contributions and to disrupt knowledge hierarchies as its foremost task. Disruption includes the contestation of researcher objectivity, which has largely served to marginalize counter-hegemonic knowledge production, a point to which we return in more detail further below. In addition, activist scholarship holds space for researchers with a desire to put their scholarship to work in service of the marginalized (and minoritized) communities to which they feel directly and personally connected.

SITUATING KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION WITHIN THE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Our third question asks, *How is activist scholarship aligned within discourses of knowledge production within the study of higher education?* To better situate our concept of counter-hegemonic knowledge production, we parallel the hegemonic-vs-counter-hegemonic binary with that of *master narratives* or *grand narratives* (Lyotard, 1984) and *counter narratives* (see Stanley, 2007) evidenced in the higher education literature. The term *master narrative* broadly refers to a hegemonic script both specifying and controlling social processes (Lyotard, 1984), which in this case refers to the definition of and limitations within academia to *what* and *whose* scholarship matters (Stanley, 2007). White cisgender heterosexual men serving as gatekeepers atop two symbiotic knowledge production enterprises: postsecondary institutions (Finklestein, Conley, & Schuster, 2016; Gagliardi, Espinosa, Turk, & Taylor, 2017) and academic journals determine, set in-motion, and preserve this *master narrative*. A third enterprise would likely include grantmaking foundations, which fund significant portions of research, the gatekeepers (i.e., boards of directors and program officers) of which are often comprised of mostly white (and mostly male) members. Across these enterprises the research agendas and paradigms considered to be valuable (i.e., worthy of publication and, ultimately, professional reward) are determined by this same constituency of master narrators, who, along with many others, conspire to perpetuate and socialize academic researchers (including those from marginalized groups in academe) to pursue master narratives. As Lawless (2003) wrote:

> . . . until we recognize that there is a master narrative in place and that we have all been participants in the structuring and application of that master narrative can we call it into question, examine it, and ask ourselves whether or not we want to change it . . . Even those who are oppressed by the master narrative are complicit in its survival and effectiveness. (p. 61)

The furtherance and preservation of master narratives, especially in contemporary academe, is increasingly attributable to the proverbial "arms race" for institutional prestige, preeminence within new knowledge economies, and profit generation (i.e., academic capitalism, see Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Similarly, the socialization and hypnosis of many minoritized college and university faculty (Harper, forthcoming) to pursue hegemonic knowledge production is closely aligned with the overall neoliberal direction of many postsecondary institutions. Almost at once does the furtherance and preservation of master narratives—through structures of recognition and reward (e.g., faculty seeking to publish in "top journals" for their promotion and tenure)—position alternative research paradigms and interests as running counter to dominant ways of *doing* scholarship. The *counter narratives*, then, represent both the intent and impact of producing knowledge in ways that challenge hegemonic scripts. Stanley (2007) wrote of counter narratives in education research:

> Perspectives that run opposite or counter to the presumed order and control are *counter narratives*. These narratives, which do not agree with and are critical of the master narrative, often arise out of individual or group experiences that do not fit the master narratives. Counter narratives act to deconstruct the master narratives, and they offer alternatives to the dominant discourse in educational research. (p. 14)

Although Stanley's (2007) analysis was an indictment of educational research more broadly, its usefulness for understanding research in higher education should not be easily dismissed. For example, higher education scholarship in which a failure to disrupt what Patton (2016) described as postsecondary *prose* is a common master narrative. Put differently, scholarship failing to challenge the "ordinary, predictable, and taken for granted ways" (Patton, 2016, p. 317) higher education functions as a stronghold of oppressive forces (e.g., racism and white supremacy, see Mustaffa, 2017), which are indeed troublesome, is ultimately a reproduction of hegemonic knowledge. We believe this includes, but is not limited to, the normative standard by which the canon of higher education research has and continues to exclude the perspectives and contributions of minoritized scholars. An empirical canon of almost exclusively White, largely male, presumably cisgender heterosexual scholars of "able mind and body" has long signaled *what* topics are worthy of investigation, *how* they should be studied, *who* should study them, and *if* they will be published.

INTERPRETIVE CRITERIA FOR ACTIVIST SCHOLARSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Finally, let us now turn toward the question of how the study of higher education might interpret what constitutes activist scholarship in higher education. In doing so, and before engaging the criteria below, let us first disclose two implicit assumptions at the foundation of our interpretations. First, we assume for scholarship to be even remotely considered as "activist" it is required to be, at minimum, critical. In the same ways activists' participation and grassroots organizing encourage critical interrogation of systems and relationships of power—ultimately for reorganization or complete dismantlement—activist scholarship must be epistemologically situated within a critical paradigm. This assumption draws heavily upon critical consciousness and Frierian "praxis" (Friere, 1970) as useful frameworks through which readers may better understand the criteria we offer below. More explicitly, the interrelation of critical reflexivity, analysis, and action directed squarely at oppressive structures needing to be transformed lay at the crux of our forthcoming prescriptions.

Second, building on our first assumption, we adopt the view that simply because the topic of activism or social justice is the espoused focus of a study, the scholarship itself is not inherently activist. Counter-hegemonic knowledge production may also meet a necessary yet insufficient condition for being interpreted as inherently activist, both the study *of* activism and scholarship *as* activism invite further interrogation. However, for greater brevity and precision, we only complicate the assumption in relation to higher education research with an espoused focus *on* activism specifically (and social justice more broadly).

In their chapter "But Is It Rigorous?," published in an edited volume on naturalistic inquiry, Guba and Lincoln (1986) offered a series of criteria by which the empirical rigor of naturalistic evaluation could be henceforth governed. As a relatively new research paradigm at the time, the impetus for establishing criteria was driven, in part, by the ontological, epistemological, and methodological limitations of established standards for rigorous scientific inquiry (i.e., validity, reliability and generalizability, and neutrality). In particular, these limitations were illuminated by efforts to conduct evaluations in new contexts that needed to account for the "real-world conditions" (Guba & Lincoln, 1986, p. 15) in which naturalistic inquiry take place, which ultimately forced a relaxation of empirical standards for rigorous research. Most notably, however, were the implicit assumptions about research (and evaluation) maintaining diligent and thorough standards for investigation. Devoid of criteria for determining trustworthiness and authenticity of naturalistic approaches, many asserted that the inherent subjectivity of the paradigm compromised its integrity and truth claims. Hence, the ever-present questions of rigor needed to be answered.

Although quite different, the logic undergirding this question of rigor is analogous to the assumptions regarding what constitutes activist scholarship in the field of higher education today. More pointedly, a common assumption about published research *on* activism (and related phenomena of interest) is that it *is*, inherently, in and of itself activist. This assumption is too infrequently interrogated and, perhaps even more so, (un)intentionally exploited by those of us attempting to align our work with the moral arc of the times. However, despite the relative longstanding study *of* activism within our field (Astin, Astin, Bayer, & Bisconti, 1975; Broadhurst & Martin, 2014; Davis, 2015; Hope, Keels, & Durkee, 2016; Morgan & Davis, 2019; Rhoads, 1998a, 1998b; Vellela, 1988), much of the extant literature frames activism as object—separate and outside of the researcher—rather than subject. Additionally, the identity politics currently shaping social and intellectual hierarchies of critical consciousness (i.e., wokeness)—within the academy and elsewhere—are uniquely reflective of an encroaching public accountability for the often "armchair revolutionaries" within the professoriate. What is more, the performative aspects of one's political subjectivity in their scholarship (e.g., using words like "activism" and "social justice" in the titles of journal articles) allows for a proliferation of similar assumptions about the substantive content of their scholarly work.

Although it is fairly easy to do (and unlikely to meet significant opposition), we invite higher education scholars to resist the assumption that simply because the topic of activism or social justice is the espoused focus of a study that the work itself is activist. To the contrary, and a point to which we alluded earlier, this has often *not* been the case in higher education around broad examinations of activism, the politics of social difference, and pervasive inequity. As a more contextually specific analogue, Harper's (2012) study of the ways in which higher education researchers "discuss and make sense of race-related findings in their studies" (p. 11) revealed most scholars often use either *semantic substitutes* or *assorted explanations* to talk around or effectively dismiss racism and racist institutional norms as plausible reasons for racial inequities. Hence, although the topic of race may appear to be centered, the basis on which systemic racial inequities and disparities exist (i.e., racism) remains obscured and in the margins.

While categorically different, the occasional centering of the *topic* of activism in the higher education literature over the decades has remained largely without authors' disclosure of their own political positionality or subjectivity. This noteworthy limitation is analogous with Harper's (2012) observations about the study of race. This is of particular importance regarding the current state of affairs in higher education research, wherein the visible presence of activism on campus and its contemporary market viability for conference presentations and publishing has seduced otherwise unconcerned scholars

to take interest in protest phenomena as topics of study. Although not yet studied systematically, some of the more recent research on activism in higher education has merely replicated common approaches (i.e., niche historical analysis), worldviews and epistemologies (i.e., post/positivism and objectivity), and phenomena of interest (i.e., student identity, sense of belonging, and involvement and engagement). That is to say, many contemporary studies have often either 1) remained largely historical and thereby not substantively engaged social movements in real time; 2) attempted to let the data "speak for themselves" without disclosing the political subjectivity (or positioned objectivity) of the researcher(s); or 3) failed to make any substantive distinction of conceptual phenomena *within* the sub-contexts of activism or social movements on-campus.

Building upon these two assumptions, and in an effort to direct higher education researchers toward interpreting scholarship as activist, we offer several criteria by which we believe activist scholarship can be both guided and measured. Notwithstanding, and to be sure, scholarship produced within a single or combination of the proposed criteria also constitutes a necessary but possibly insufficient artifact of activist scholarship. Again, such determinations are as subjective as they are contestable. Therefore, we at once dismiss any claim to have solved this concern. Rather than attempting to be the final word on this matter, we invite the following criteria to be a point of departure for critical consideration and further debate within our field. We encourage higher education scholars to challenge, extend, and reformulate what we offer, which is but another touchstone for refining our own research approaches in attempts to pursue and produce transformative knowledge.

Activist scholarship is transformative in worldview and explicit in intention

With regard to worldview as a dimension of one's research approach (Creswell, 2013), activist scholarship should firmly situate itself within a transformative paradigm. Consistent with Creswell's (2008, 2013) definition, we use worldview as a frame for the broad philosophical assumptions undergirding social science research studies. By transformative we are specifically referring to a worldview that informs and guides research with political intention, oriented around issues of power and justice, concerned with social change, and, when appropriate, co-constructive and collaborative in nature (Creswell, 2008, 2013; Mertens, 2009; Mertens, Holmes, & Harris, 2009). With regard to co-construction of knowledge, perhaps no more singular methodological aspect of activist scholarship is more important. Consistent with a multitude of perspectives on what methodologically constitutes activist scholarship (see Hale, 2008), some of which we described earlier, the framing and usefulness of communities as "knowledgeable, empowered participants" (Hale, 2008, p.4) throughout the research process is critical. Hale (2008) further wrote:

> . . . activist scholars work in dialogue, collaboration, [and] alliance with people who are struggling to better their lives; activist scholarship embodies a responsibility for results that these "allies" can recognize as their own, value in their own terms, and use as they see fit. (p. 4)

While this is important from an ethical position within research contexts, it is also an important strategy to interrupt dominant academe's monopoly and authoritative control over the processes of knowledge production to which we earlier alluded.

Secondly, activist scholarship should be as explicit as possible in its political intention, which should be further substantiated by the substance of the knowledge it pursues *and* produces. This approach likely raises concerns from post/positivist researchers clinging to hegemonic notions of objectivity as a moral, methodological high ground. However, we contend that intention and subjectivity with regard to issues of equity in higher education are required to disrupt master narratives (Stanley, 2007) and postsecondary prose (Patton, 2016) within our field. To be sure, our proposition is less a call for an outright rejection of objectivity in dichotomous exchange for blanket subjectivity. More so, this criterion is offered in ways consistent with a perspective of *positioned objectivity* (Hale, 2008). Positioned objectivity refers to a resignification of the hegemonic term, in which a deepened awareness of activist research's ethical-political contexts (Sjoberg, 1967) and "situated knowledge" (Haraway, 1988) provide more insightful, answerable, and complete research products. A positioned objectivity requires producers of activist scholarship to critically reflect on both where they currently stand and from whence they came in relation to their work (Mart*í*nez, 2008). They must also systematically monitor how one's relationships with research subjects and field sites affect the material content and substantive meaning of data being collected. Furthermore, as an exercise of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), activist scholarship in higher education should intentionally intervene in current sociopolitical realities being experienced on campus and within the broader world. Given our field's frequent concern with improving various inequities through intentionality and purposeful decision making, scholarship devoid of political intent is unlikely to, itself, be remotely activist. We offer this criterion partially as a direct response to earlier higher education research in which formidable scholars (see Astin et al., 1975) were perceived as structurally positioned in opposition to student-organized resistance from the outset. More broadly, we believe skepticism among prospective participants is likely to be lessened by the disclosure of researchers' explicit political intentions, especially when informed by and aligned to participants' goals and interests.

Activist scholarship is grounded in the work

Activist scholarship—and those believing themselves to be activist scholars—should be grounded in the work of activism and organizing for

transformative change rather than simply the words (e.g., the rhetoric of social justice). Educators, including scholars, often conceptualize words and concepts that are meant to capture and, at some point, enact institutional transformation in higher education and society writ large. For example, terms such as "social justice," "inclusive excellence," and "diversity" are conceptualized with the explicit purpose of naming and addressing systemic change. Yet, due to the interchangeable, often-unclear definitions of these concepts, terms of inclusion tend to lose their ability to inform systemic change and combat institutional racism (Harris, Barone, & Patton, 2016). Furthermore, terms and concepts are often mis/used by scholars and practitioners without any real understanding of the labor required to actualize the rhetoric (Harris et al., 2016). Indeed, "social justice" and "intersectionality" continue to be used as provocative buzzwords in academic scholarship, but how one moves from words to working towards fighting injustices or addressing intersecting systems of power and domination is often lost in translation (Harris et al., 2016; Luft & Ward, 2009).

Activist scholarship, therefore, does not anchor itself in words that signal to others their writing is a form of activism but rather are focused on how one's writing might move others, and oneself, to "do the work." We do not mean to suggest that words, and more specifically, theories, are not useful to activist scholarship. Instead, we urge scholars to operationalize words and theories toward transformative action to create social change (Freire, 1970, 1973). Furthermore, this *praxis* (Freire, 1970, 1973) is ongoing and reflexive. Activist scholarship is neither stagnant nor stuck in discursive and/or theoretical musings. As we articulate above, such movement is likely to already be occurring and should inform work with the explicit intention of political alignment with the struggles of everyday people. For instance, instead of simply mentioning the term "intersectionality" in perfunctory ways in one's scholarly writing, activist scholars must *use* intersectionality to its fullest capacity. Scholars may use intersectionality to illuminate how intersecting systems of power and domination are embedded throughout college and university campuses. More specifically, activist scholarship should dually align with constituencies fighting for social change from an intersectional framework (e.g., a Black Queer Feminist lens; see Black Youth Project 100, n.d.; Carruthers, 2018) while also altering individual and organizational actions, advocacy (e.g., research to influence policy), research agendas, and service activities towards these ends.

It is important to also address the extent to which service generally—and those service activities situated within communities outside and away from academia specifically—relates to activist scholarship in two important ways. The first considers the diminishing returns of engaging in service for the professionalized scholar (i.e., tenure/tenure-track and research faculty). This

is especially important with regard to the often hierarchal organization of service activities based on their proximity to one's academic unit, institution, or academic field/discipline. This goes without mention of the generally subordinated position of service within broader hierarchies of faculty work, which privilege research among the highest priority and service the lowest. As we have been graciously reminded by reviewers of early drafts of this article, professional recognition and reward structures commonly force the compartmentalization of service activities, especially those outside the accepted "city limits" of scholarly careers. This point is not insignificant in that, as a second relation, service often expands the otherwise insular production of scholarship through a symbiotic relationship. In this way, activist scholarship both informs and is informed by the work of social action taking place at the heart of communities, particularly among scholars for whom activism off and away from campus is a critical dimension of their public service.

Activist scholarship is intersectional

Activist scholarship should either explicitly account for or be intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). On a macro-level, intersectional analyses interrogate how systems of domination, such as white supremacy, exist "within the matrix of power relations" and "can comply with and reproduce oppression along another dimension" (Pyke, 2010, p. 564). Intersectionality encourages an exploration into how macro-level systems (e.g., the law, political movements, and education policy) influence the ways in which identities are negotiated and experienced on an everyday, micro-level. Thus, activist scholarship employing intersectionality in their work must look beyond the mere existence of systems of domination towards the ways in which these systems work together to construct one another and shape unique experiences at their intersections (Bowleg, 2008; Collins, 1990). Intersectional analyses represent an important form of activist scholarship because they aim to disrupt oppressive systems while also centering individuals and communities at the margins (Thornton-Dill & Zambrana, 2009). Additionally, intersectional analyses allow for more complicated understandings of social movements—both on-campus and within society—and prevent researchers from negligently engaging in the theoretical erasure (Crenshaw, 1989), specifically of those with multiple minoritized identities, as well as reducing intersectional issues of social justice to some singular foci.

For example, the Movement for Black Lives (most commonly, but mistakenly referred to as Black Lives Matter movement) is a contemporary social movement "focused on a hopeful and inclusive vision of Black joy, safety and prosperity," which includes "freedom from violence and economic inequality, as well as the freedom to realize our greatest dreams" (Movement for Black Lives, n.d.). However, as a broad-based movement, various contingencies often negate Black women's experiences to include smaller social move-

ment organizations (Tilly, 2004), collectives, and individual political actors. Specifically, the negation is related to the uniquely gendered dimensions of anti-Black racism within Black women's (including Black Trans women) lives, for which approaches devoid of intersectional analyses fail to account (see Crenshaw & Ritchie, 2015). Therefore, activist scholarship in higher education must be intentional about centering analyses of systemic oppression and individual experiences in an intersectional way. Without intentionally employing intersectionality, the possibility of theoretical erasure is all but imminent, and thereby further limiting the extent to which meaningful advancement of equity and social justice across multiple areas, simultaneously, can be achieved through scholarship.

Activist scholarship divests from the norms of the academy

Additionally, producers of activist scholarship should *publicly* wrestle with the tension between engaging in and divesting from the intellectual and professional validation offered by a neoliberal, white supremacist cishetereopatriarchal academy. This "tension" exists because the structures of the dominant academy reflect the very oppressive dimensions of society activists seek to dismantle. Therefore, producing activist scholarship within such contexts is often interpreted as threatening to the existing relationships of power, which many postsecondary institutions seek to maintain. What is more, many activist scholars are forced into a prerequisite of paradox, which requires they both advance the capital (i.e., prestige) of colleges and universities while critiquing various aspects of postsecondary and academic lifeworlds. Not only does this result in the ongoing consciousness-powerlessness paradox (Harper & Hurtado, 2009), but in cognitive dissonance as many academic scholars navigate hyper-political promotion and tenure processes. Furthermore, scholarship concerning itself with critical analyses of power relations, intersecting systems of oppression, structures of domination, and identity-specific experiences of minoritized individuals are often considered less valid and less robust than research agendas grounded in the mythology of objectivism and other post/positivist paradigms (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Scheurich & Young, 1997; Stanley, 2007). The cultures and worldviews of many activist scholars, who are likely themselves members of marginalized and minoritized groups, and their activist scholarship are routinely "considered not appropriate, scholarly, or in good form" (Gusa, 2010, p. 475). Although some colleagues might argue certain professional associations, funding agencies, and individual scholars represent a shift in recognizing and rewarding activist scholarship, we contend that such shifts are largely atypical. More specifically, we believe any perceivable shift is largely due to *individuals* who skillfully navigated the normative limitations of these organizations to subsequently advance more activist-oriented agendas. Therefore, any perception of such shifts as institutionalized changes in academic norms remains unseen.

This tension also exists more insidiously, in which the academy often rewards "the words" while simultaneously discouraging scholars from engaging in "the work." For example, employing the term "intersectionality" in grant applications and manuscripts "has material rewards: it can open doors, earn funding, win members, or validate projects" (Luft & Ward, 2009, p.16). Yet, scholars who use intersectionality as an ornamental buzzword to express their familiarity with the (popularity of the) theory often do so without engaging in intersectional efforts (Davis, 2008; Luft & Ward, 2009). When they do, particularly within their own institutions in effort to instill greater accountability, many scholars may be discouraged, isolated, and even publicly betrayed by institutional leaders and colleagues. For these reasons, our use of divestment is not intended to casually encourage a complete relinquishing of one's academic profession. We recognize such divestment from the academy for most scholars is largely impractical. At minimum, especially for early-career scholars still working to establish their *bona fides*, completely leaving academia would likely complicate one's ability to produce scholarship altogether. Furthermore, a lack of institutional affiliation often raises questions of authority and legitimacy within certain milieus (e.g., public policy) in which the earned privilege of credentials could be beneficial. Most importantly, however, a complete divestment would also severely limit one's access and opportunities to engage in structural and invasive disruption from within the academy (Piven, 2006).

To this point, we concur with the perspective that, as academics, broadly orienting our work towards the causes of social justice, it is incumbent upon us to "create and defend spaces from which to carry out activist scholarship within often inhospitable environments" (Hale, 2008, p. 17). Therefore, we encourage scholars to, as best they can, continue to do "the work" from *within* the academy while also critiquing the very structures constraining their ability to do so. As Hale (2008) further suggests, scholars must leverage and wield the modest institutional power they are afforded to achieve their overall goals while remaining firmly committed to the perpetual undoing of elitism and hierarchies frequently imposed upon them. What we are more specifically suggesting, however, is a need for *emotional* and *material* divestments from the intellectual and professional validations offered by much of the dominant academy. We additionally encourage scholars to divest from the traditional recognitions and rewards (i.e., awards and honors from professional associations, grant procurement, and promotion and tenure) likely to discourage the production of action-oriented research and scholarship of consequence.

Activist scholarship embraces a radical imagination

Finally, activist scholarship should empower individuals and institutions to engage in exercises of radical imagination (Kelley, 2002), ultimately toward envisioning a critically conscious, equity-minded (Bensimon, 2007), and

actively engaged postsecondary enterprise that places people over profits, production, and prestige (i.e., the Woke Academy) or the current charge for higher education scholars to "*get woke* and *stay woke*' (ASHE, 2018, p. 1). Without imagination, postsecondary educators are forced into a perpetual, reformist cycle of identifying the systems and structures to be dismantled without meaningfully considering what needs to be built, if at all, in their place. Simultaneously, envisioning must be accompanied by some provision of practically useful insights and recommendations that aid individuals and institutions toward continually *enacting* social justice, not merely as a philosophy but as the ultimate reality. This requires, then, that activist scholarship move people beyond the concept of "woke" as an adjective to the actualization of *being* and *doing* "woke" as a verb. Therein, activist scholarship must resist temptations for affirming "wokeness" as an individual or organizational destination. Instead, activist scholarship must continually inscribe the process of articulating and performing radical transparency, sociopolitical accountability, and transformative action towards a reimagined system and structure of higher education. In part, such an imagination might consider the ways in which one's scholarship engages with broader publics (e.g., participatory action research) often disenfranchised and excluded from postsecondary campuses and scholarly discourses. Such an imagination might also consider more deliberately how resources from within institutions can be leveraged to support activism and organizing work happening outside campus contexts.

CONCLUSION

Our paper aimed to debate and delimit the myriad ways scholarship and activism are related within higher education research. More specifically, we sought to advance a conceptual argument regarding how researchers and their work might be interpreted as activist. In doing so, we first engaged literature in sociology and higher education to uncover perspectives of what constitutes both scholarship and activism. We used these foundations to construct our own understanding of activist scholarship, which we conceptualized as counter-hegemonic knowledge production. Then, using compelling cases from the higher education literature, we discussed the relationship between research and activism at two noteworthy empirical points in time. Next, we interrogated the cases (and higher education research on activism as a whole) to challenge the assumption that the study *of* activism inherently *is* activist. Finally, we offered several interpretive criteria for considering higher education scholarship as activist. To be sure, we believe such criteria are, at best, points of departure for thoughtful consideration, debate, and further exploration by our field. What we have offered might also be considered as a set of heuristics for a more precise content analysis of the existing and

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developing research on the activisms of student, faculty, and staff. Such an undertaking was beyond the limitations of this article but is an important future direction for more definitively determining how political subjectivity relates to the pressing and intractable social issues studied by higher education researchers.

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