



## Book Review

### Anti-racist Scholar-activism

Joseph-Salisbury, R., & Connelly, L. (2021). Manchester University Press. ISBN 9781526157959 (cloth) US\$120.00; ISBN 9781526157966 (paper) US\$21.95; ISBN 9781526157942 (e-book) US\$21.95. 280 pages.

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Despite experiencing the various rocky and rockier bottoms that seem to be the institutional norm of a path to someday “arriving” at the permanent academic job destination, academia overall has felt good to me. I think I genuinely love and champion it, want to see it grow, and want to see my undergraduate students see themselves as graduate students with future careers in academia. But I am a white settler for whom academia is supposed to be welcoming; notwithstanding that I am a woman, academia has always encouraged me to dedicate my life to “being a scholar.” *Anti-Racist Scholar-Activism*, by Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Laura Connelly, is an intervention in my sentiment. I was uncomfortable reading this book; white fragility, articulated by Robin DiAngelo (2018) as the expectation of “racial comfort,” was underlying this experience. In that context, it took me a long time to write this review, because I wanted to do the book justice by sitting with my discomfort and by taking lessons and insights into the ongoing stuff of academia I was doing at Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU) in the lower mainland of British Columbia, Canada, on unceded traditional and ancestral lands of the Kwantlen, Musqueam, Katzie, Semiahmoo, Tsawwassen, Qayqayt and Kwikwetlem peoples. I acknowledge the occupation of this land particularly as a genuine reminder of why reading this book was important for me in my roles at KPU.

As stated of the book’s intent and purpose, it does not prescribe how to *be* an anti-racist scholar-activist, which would ironically undermine the resistance, contradiction, and struggle that the authors argue is fundamental to anti-racist scholar-activism; rather the book presents a “live text” (p. 204) “manifesto” (pp. 5, 202-221) of principles to crystalize “collective reflection, conversation, and praxes” (p. 204). Yet this book also cleverly appealed to me

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as “a scholar” in its approach to research, showing the very best that qualitative methods have to offer.

Chapter One highlights tensions, contradictions, and opportunities inherent in the concept of anti-racist scholar-activism, ultimately arguing for a praxis of *doing* over being, or action over identity politics. It highlights the disconnect between universities and communities, as well as the privileged and sometimes pretentious positionality of being a scholar protected by institutions in ways community activists are not. Chapter Two elaborates “working in service,” describing accountability, usefulness, and accessibility, challenging the idea “that academics work *for* the university” (p. 86). Chapter Three is a very provocative read on “reparative theft: stealing from the university,” asking, “how can we exploit the pockets of possibility the university presents to us?” (p. 90). Here, exploitation of university resources in service of radical movements is presented as a higher form of justice and a challenge to the criminalization of resistance. For instance, because academic freedom is (in theory) protected, it can be safer for academics to publicly engage in radical work. Using salaried time for activism “not only bolsters communities of resistance [but]... also rubs against – or seeks to undermine and redress – a neoliberal capitalist system that steals all of our time” (pp. 98-99). Chapter Four details backlash and surviving backlash, including the concept of “struggling where we are” (p. 139) and being strategic – for instance, doing what is needed to achieve tenure to be enabled to do anti-racist activism. Regarding struggling where we are, Chapter Five elaborates two approaches: fostering “a classroom-to-activism pipeline” (p. 144), and then resistance in the wider university, particularly in labour union involvement and in meetings. The authors write, “we introduce the pipeline metaphor here to think about how our classroom praxes can create routes that enable students to move from the classroom into activism” (p. 154).<sup>1</sup> Finally, Chapter Six looks at the reflexivity required to acknowledge the institutional complicity of working within the university, and the reality that scholar-activists, with their proximity to power, personally benefit from their connections to the communities in which they do their activism. “Surviv[ing] with these contradictions,” as one of the authors’ informants put it (p. 184), cannot “lead to a passivity of guilt” (p. 185), yet it raises a tougher question: do the benefits to communities of resistance outweigh the necessary complicity of scholar-activists? Clearly finding they do, the final “manifesto” chapter offers 10 points of action to cohere and conclude the book.

I was doing teaching, research, committee work, hiring, curriculum design, and leadership while reading this book. Our institution and its members were and are engaging in various forms of transformative work, some which the

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<sup>1</sup> My colleague, Seema Ahluwalia, leads a “service learning” course in our program where students are taught, trained, encouraged, and assessed on their ability to be of service to non-profit organizations in their communities. Her approach foregrounds their humility and learning in their placements, as opposed to the idea that the students bring expertise from the university to the organizations and communities in which they work.

frameworks of this book might recognize as anti-racist scholar-activism, and others as co-optation or overclaiming, as described in the first chapter. To the extent that I am a part of certain corners of decision-making and power, the book influenced KPU. For example, members of the Department of Sociology, of which I am the collegial chair, are advocating to change our minimum qualifications for new faculty, to recognize experience and knowledge equivalent to credentials. This, in turn, will reformulate our approach to hiring new faculty, including how we assess applications and conduct interviews. Of course, this is not directly serving communities, and to consider it anti-racist activism is overclaiming; it is cooptation if I claim it serves communities instead of the maintenance of the neoliberal university in a context of increasing anti-racist critique from activists, scholars, and internal and external scholar-activists, such as the authors of this book.

That being said, the book's data and analysis particularly reflect the UK context, wherein "impacts" and metrics of performance are much more central than they are where I am situated. KPU is Canada's only polytechnic university,<sup>2</sup> having traditional academic training that is occurring in the same institution as vocational training, which is often cutting-edge and timely (e.g., the brewing program and the farm schools).<sup>3</sup> KPU also offers a certificate in Non-governmental Organizations and Non-profit Studies.<sup>4</sup> The university is also primarily undergraduate, with open enrollment for many programs. It is a non-residential commuter school, and a teaching institution where "scholarly" output of its faculty is not rigorously required or measured. Because of these factors, faculty at KPU are necessarily connected to communities and industries in ways that might not be as common in the context to which the authors of the present book refer; certainly this varies across faculties at KPU. Even so, the connection to industries seems to be deepening and flourishing. In this context, what is the institutional connection to struggling communities and communities of resistance? Clearly, our individual faculty members and their networks are doing work that is represented as anti-racist scholar-activism in this book. In sum, I found the book to be readable, timely, thought-provoking, and action-provoking, particularly action on the part of academics to serve marginalized communities and communities of resistance.

## References

DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism*. Beacon Press.

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<sup>2</sup> See:

[https://www.kpu.ca/sites/default/files/downloads/kwantlen\\_polytechnic\\_university\\_overview7793.pdf](https://www.kpu.ca/sites/default/files/downloads/kwantlen_polytechnic_university_overview7793.pdf) para.1

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.kpu.ca/brew>; <https://www.kpu.ca/farmschools>

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://calendar.kpu.ca/programs-az/arts/non-governmental-organizations-nonprofit-studies/non-governmental-organizations-nonprofit-studies-certificate/>