

**Breaking the Boundaries of Activism: (Un)Engaging Elitist
Conceptions and (Re)Claiming Activist Histories of the Oppressed**

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"They are condemned to poverty, decrepitude, wretchedness and despair. In the United States their lot is no happier. To reconcile this barbarous treatment with the humanist morality they profess to follow, the ruling class adopts the convenient plan of refusing to consider them as real people: if their voices were heard they would be forced to acknowledge that these were human voices"- Simone de Beauvoir, The Coming of Age

Activism is an important piece of social change, both in the sense that it conveys the message that change is necessary and because, in the case of oppressed persons, it allows engagement in active subjectivity, a sense of self-efficacy, and of having transcended the bad faith forced upon us by dominant culture. In short, it gives us both a voice and the confidence to use it. I would like to trouble the hegemonic conception of activism in order to show how academic elitism, epistemic ignorance and segregation, and theoretical apartheid contribute to the devaluation and erasure of the activism engaged in by women who live their lives in poverty. I would also like to trouble the ways that horizontal hostility is used within oppressed groups to both discourage and to socially sanction women who engage in any activism against authority. The devaluation and erasure of activism engaged in by oppressed women has an insidious effect on our ability to engage in resistant activity with efficacy and it attempts to put up an impenetrable boundary around us, creating, as de Beauvoir believes, "a situation in which people may be enclosed as narrowly as in a prison (7)". The oppression that cannot be seen, but only felt and lived, tends to make resistant actions more difficult to carry out. This is because "With the mechanism of symbolic violence, domination tends to take the form of a more effective, and in this sense, brutal means of oppression Consider contemporary societies where the violence has become

soft, invisible” (Bourdieu & Eagleton qtd in Charlesworth, 6). I will here define activism as any act of resistance, implicit or explicit, quiet or loud, that seeks to break down dominant society and create revolution.

The dominant group has used both epistemic ignorance and epistemic segregation to erase and/or appropriate the activism of the oppressed. For the purpose of this paper, epistemic ignorance will be seen as a construct intentionally held by the dominant group *about* the oppressed. It is a cognitive endeavor and is defined as any instance in which knowledge is withheld from certain groups, false knowledge about a group is disseminated, or when the dominant group purports an unawareness of the harm it is causing, in other words it is a refusal to acknowledge the relationality between groups. Sarah Hoagland’s idea of relationality can be defined as the idea that who we are as social beings is constructed through interaction with others (98). For instance, privileged women cannot exist unless disadvantage is intentionally and actively constructed, no one can preexist this relation of economic classes as privileged or disadvantaged. This intentional activity is made possible by the refusal to acknowledge connections with individuals who are different. Epistemic segregation is *how* the oppressed are affected, hence it has a behavioral facet. I define it as any instance of exclusion of oppressed groups from knowledge seeking, attainment, or cognitive authority. Including any instance of exclusion due to gender, race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, ideas, education, or vocabulary. Cognitive authority will be defined as competency to hold knowledge, and is ascribed by the dominant group (Garner, 2).

Academic elitism is a part of epistemic ignorance and segregation. In regard to activism, academic elitism can most easily be seen in scholarly works written by educated, upper middle class women who write about the activism of disadvantaged women without consulting them. In doing this they are denying their relationality with these women and denying the cognitive authority of these

women. This one-sided “study” of the activism of women who live in poverty and the appropriation of both their activist work and their ideas contribute to the erasure of the activism that has consistently been engaged in by this group. This allows for further oppression.

Simon Charlesworth has noted that it is quite hard in academia to have the lives and actions of the “lower” class recognized. Charlesworth believes that this results from both differences in comportment, embodiment, and communication, and because the world of academia “treats issues of deprivation with a quiet disdain issuing from an arrogance born of security” (14). Drawing on the work of Merleau-Ponty, Charlesworth has posited that the types of communication used by different economic classes result from very different ways of being-in-the-world. When one lives in poverty one's being-in-the-world is based in the present and the present past, not the future, one is forced to give precedence to survival, and to ways that one has learned to survive. As a result of this comportment and behavior will be based on this embodied need to focus on survival. This embodied way of taking in the trauma that comes from deprivation means that “The traumatic experience does not survive as a representation in the mode of objective consciousness and as a ‘dated’ moment; it is of its essence to survive only as a manner of being with a certain degree of generality (Merleau-Ponty 96). Since the deprived are forced to focus only upon the trauma that comes from survival, Merleau-Ponty believes that the “world loses its substance and eventually becomes no more than a *certain dread*” (96, emphasis, original). This means that one transitions from being-in-the-world to being-in-the-dread-world. Differences in types of communication stem from this because when one operates from an embodied state of being-in-dread one does not generally communicate in the same way that a privileged person who does not need to tend to the immediacy of survival can communicate.

When in a state of being-in-dread communication takes on a more visceral aspect than the form of “proper” speech that is generally recognized in the academy. The visceral language that is used

can, and does, lead academics to state that it is unintelligible (Lugones, 84). Charlesworth believes that this unintelligibility results in silence, I believe that it results in a refusal of types language and communication by the over privileged (Charlesworth, 144). The visceral language, bodily comportment, and action needed in communication is present, it is merely present in a way in which the dominant group refuses to engage with. When looking at instances of academic elitism about the activism of the dispossessed, one can readily see that activism is present in the language and. behavior of these persons.

Theoretical apartheid was examined by Chela Sandoval in "Methodology of the oppressed (70). Individuals working in different disciplines have been theorizing about resistance to oppression for many years and, while these theories are similar, they are kept separate, between both disciplines and groups. When a discipline insists on closely guarding its hallowed, hegemonic canon and refuses to engage with other disciplines to maintain its self-proclaimed purity, theoretical apartheid will result. This division results in the individual study of intermeshed oppressions, as the oppression of privileged white women, women of color, the colonized, the poor, and nonheterosexuals to name a few. Since there are few oppressed people privileged enough to suffer a single type of oppression this causes particular tension for those of us who are told to choose which oppression to resist. For example a white lesbian who grew up in abject poverty will not fit exactly with hegemonic feminists, queer theorists, nor with Marxists. When recognition of the (disciplinary) multiplicity existent in the singular study of resistance to oppression is chosen, apartheid ends and coalitions can form that can make better use of existing knowledge. This work can then be compiled and extended by larger groups and each group can then bring their own disciplinary style to the table. Sandoval goes on to call for coalition building by positing that by allowing this division to occur we are playing into the relationship of power and knowledge and further entrenching the ideas of the dominant group. There is, I believe, no better way to do this than to use ones voice and to listen to the voices of others who have been oppressed, particularly if the voice

or the oppression is different. .

Horizontal hostility has been examined by Maria Lugones who believes that it is based on the need for oppressed groups to have a closed culture (152). This closed culture serves many purposes such as giving one a sense of belonging in a world of exclusion, facilitating the formation of identity, and allowing one to resist the identity imposed by the dominant group. Because the ability to form ones own identity and to belong to a group in a world where one has been assigned an “inferior” status is so important that any difference within the group will be looked at with suspicion, causing the Other within the group to be ostracized. Frantz Fanon also looked at horizontal hostility. He posits that much of the hostility within oppressed groups is caused by the tension one necessarily feels when one watches the Other have total control over her (54). Both the psychic and muscular tension from this is then taken out on those within the oppressed group. This is often seen within groups living in poverty when he hostility turns into murder. Horizontal hostility with regard to activism can be seen when women socially sanction members of their own group who are engaged in activism. For example a woman who engages in activism against sexual harassment by a man who is in authority over housing projects will be socially shunned by other women living there, and many times physical violence between the women will grow from this.

In this paper I am examining the ways in which these constructs are used to discourage women living in poverty from engaging in activism and how they are also used to erase the activism that has already been engaged in. I am also examining concrete examples of scholarly works, personal narratives of activism, and examples found in popular culture. I will examine ways of furthering activism within this group and ways to reestablish concrete histories of activism engaged in by women in poverty.

This paper began with my frustration over so very rarely being able to find a voice similar to mine in literature about feminism and/or activism. I am writing this for all of the people who have ever

been forced to live within the genocide of poverty and have resisted it, those who have gotten out and have turned to academia with all the hope in the world, only to be turned away by most, for those who have been turned away and have helped the next turned away as I was, and particularly for other women, like my mother, who would picket anything anywhere in order to try to make the dominant group listen and change. My friend Mariana Ortega had the same frustration for a different reason and began an article abstract with this passage *"The aim of this essay is to analyze the notion of "loving, knowing ignorance," a type of "arrogant perception" that produces ignorance about women of color and their work at the same time that it proclaims to have both knowledge about and loving perception toward them (56)."* I have had the same experience but with poverty, we are either excluded completely because the elites refuse to grant us cognitive authority or we are written about as if we are mold being observed by a scientist, spoken of as if we do not exist, as if we have no spaces, bodies, let alone voices, and judgment is passed on us, our activism, our feminism, and our academic ability as a direct result of our zip code, bank account, or lack thereof.

In one particularly frustrating experience I was reading a book about welfare written by women who knew nothing about living like that except how easy it is to force us to. I came upon these direct quotes from Mimi Abramovitz in this book. "We know very little about the ways in which low income women, the majority of social welfare clients, have tried, as a group, to shape social welfare policy on their own behalf" (214)- yes am certain you do not, you have failed to ask us, do we have power to shape social welfare policy, no, would social workers have jobs without us, again no. Then further on she denies our ability to "benefit from the sense of power that stems from knowing their own history" (215) - is this true? Is it not the knowledge of my own history that has lent me the fortitude to get through high school- the first person in my family to do this, then though college, then graduate school? Is it not the memory of my mother and her picket signs and crashing of town council meetings that made me believe that what I need matters too? Is it not the memory of my undergrad mentor being an

activist in the face of academic elitism that gave me the confidence to dare apply to grad school? She then goes on to state that aside from civil rights and the labor movement few women from these backgrounds have been activists- again, how many of us did you ask before speaking about us (215)? So, using my new found anger and sense of academic entitlement from being a graduate student I dared email her with these questions, I was summarily dismissed, as if because I was one of these women for 33 years I now have no right in academia to dare to question the great upper middle class elitist. This also shows the harm of theoretical apartheid, there are others who have spoken to the poor from different fields who were also erased.

So I will now leave the ivory tower for a hot second and talk about those I am giving voice to, because, as Jean-Paul Sartre said in his taped conversations with Simone de Beauvoir, the responsibility of the intellectual who chooses the people over the elites is to give them the chance to use their voices and to make their needs heard, that, in summary, is the aim of both this paper and my life (Adieux, 4). I will begin with a bit of humor from pop culture. On the show *Maude* there was an episode I could not grasp the importance of until I bought the series this summer. *Maude*, as a well kept upper middle class white woman with a black maid was giving a fundraising party for a black activist so that she could invite people with high social status to her party. However she decided only to invite one black couple who then canceled. She was frantic to find anyone who was not white to attend her party, and, with the wit only Bea Arthur can bring, said that she did not want to seem like a white woman with money who paid black women to do the things she did not want to do herself, she was told immediately by her daughter that that is all that she is, a well kept white woman paying a black woman to do the things she thought she was too good to do. The relationality so well-spoken of by Sarah Hoagland is apparent in more than one place here. First *Maude* was trying to throw this party, not because she cared about the movement, but because she so cared about what others thought of her, secondly it showed that even though she claimed she was helping others she was re-creating the torments of poverty and racism on a daily basis.

Maude ended by having everyone find out what she had done and was forced to acknowledge her part in oppression. In this way, long before people were writing about epistemic segregation, Bea Arthur was showing how to break it down (Maude).

My mother, although never having studied feminism or anything academic taught me to be an activist. She did this with her own activism. She was famous at the factory she worked at for many years for starting sit down strikes even over a tone of voice, she would walk out of any job, no matter the consequences, because she refused to be spoken to like she was trash, she fought for my rights at school as a troubled child who was very bright, she taught me that education is something useful, that one could use it to end the horrors of poverty. She fought for living wages, for my family members rights, and, at the end of her life for the right of sick people who have been tortured by physicians for years to choose when to end their lives and to have access to adequate pain medication, this was after 12 years of feeding tubes, tracheotomy tubes, no food or drink, endless surgeries, an eye that was stitched shut, and immense pain from her brain tumor. During this time I took up the fight for her as well, putting the activism I had watched my entire life into practice.

While my mother was growing up during the depression she learned early on that poverty was one of the worst ways in which one could be harmed, and, since there was little worse than starving, freezing, and being refused medical care, one may as well fight against it as live with it in passivity and assist the people who are doing the harming. She also learned that even though her mother could be very quiet and not speak back when she went to the country club to clean up after and wait on people that these people treated her just as badly, if not perhaps worse than, they would have if she would have spoken back to them. She, as I did many years later, had the experience of watching her mother be humiliated for a bit of food. The difference was that her mother would take it unspeakingly until she arrived home. Violence would quickly ensue, usually with the children being the recipients. My mother

decided that no matter what I would never watch her beg for food and take it home, she was sure that it was easier to be hungry than degraded. She would often have to go to the welfare office, it was not that she did not want to work, work she would beg for, it was, as it is now, that no work exists in Youngstown, Ohio. The first thing the social worker, who would not have work either if not for us, would say is still doing nothing? If it continued on like that we would leave with no food stamps, having told her everything that we do, better to speak back and leave hungry. That taught me that acting up does bring you something even if it is not the thing you had set out to attain, we may have left hungry but we had self respect and this is something that cannot be purchased. The epistemic ignorance here is blatant, false information was disseminated about the poor, i.e. that we did not want to work, that we deserved to be treated like dirt. By telling the truth and letting the work she did looking for work be known, and by letting it be known that we were not dirt, my mother was battling against the dominant culture- this is activism at its finest, even with no definition or degree to certify it.

Another example of my mother's activism and the violence that comes about horizontally began as an argument with the housing department over the roaches that our apartment was infested with. My mother scrubbed that house everyday with bleach and nothing could get them out. Though they came to inspect at will, every 6 months or so, to make sure that no one had any valuables, they continually insisted there were no roaches. Since we did not get to choose where to live and these men had the power to let us live anywhere at all this was a huge deal to make. One of the women next door was so frightened that he would, as he had the power to, simply throw us all out, that she started an argument with my mother about staying quiet. My mother asked her over what? An apartment with no heat that was crawling with roaches- we would be better off sleeping in the cars. The woman became so upset that she hit my mother and violence took the place of speech. In the end we still had roaches and my mother still bleached the whole house everyday but, again, at least she had tried to do something. In this case epistemic segregation was used- my mother was not granted the cognitive

authority to know a wall covered in roaches when she saw it. She was, again, battling false knowledge about the poor and forcing those in power to at least hear her and the results of their harm, even if they chose to do nothing. In doing this she kept a hold on her self respect and taught others like her that they also deserve it.

I will look at one final instance of my mother's activism. My mom had decided before I was born that I would be the one to leave, go to college, to have decent things, an enjoyable job. When I was young she taught me to read before I started school, I had to be better than everyone to get anywhere, that she was sure of. From the beginning of my education there was trouble. The system thought our family, no matter how bright, was a waste- no one had ever graduated. They refused to put me in second grade where my reading and math levels were, she picketed the school, while they made me be in with the other kids my age who couldn't read yet they did give me work suited to my abilities. Then in high school they told me I had to go to vocational school, it was ridiculous to say that I would go to college, no I could not take the academic classes, no my IQ score couldn't matter nor could my grades, I was from my family, we amount to nothing because in this country we are nothing, as de Beauvoir points out so well in my epigraph. My mother, again, picketed the school, the board meetings, and any town meetings that went on. She fought nose to nose with the superintendent, adamant that no matter who liked it I would go to college. Though they did not wish to listen to her reasoning her decibel level won out in the end. While this is just a blatant case of refusing to allow one access to knowledge my mother battled it and in this case won, I had the few academic classes offered in small schools in the 1980's. This again, is activism- she forced them to educate me so that one day I could, instead of spending my entire life in the projects as she did, speak at academic conferences and teach my own college classes. In what seemed like a small battle to some, and was ignored by others, she gave me this chance for a decent life in one fell stroke of a very loud voice.

In a final piece of pop culture I will share a piece of my favorite show- *Good Times*. The character Florida was given the choice between helping a crooked politician or being evicted and she packed her things. In the end she found a way for her son JJ to speak on television about the politician, to show what the man was, while looking as if he were trying to help out. The politician was forced to be ridiculed and to let them keep their apartment. At the end he thanked her and said that as long as someone like him had power there would be people like her in the projects, she told him he was right, but, that in using him to speak out as she did, hopefully soon no more men like him would have power, unfortunately 30 years later I am writing about this as it is probably happening in real time. The lesson that she taught was one that cannot, must not be overlooked, that we can and will speak out and after enough of it we will no longer be the Other (*Good Times*).

This voice, these voices, starved, frozen, abused, battered, living in abject poverty with no way out, yet still speaking, then yelling, then screaming, are the voices that need to be acknowledged by academia. These voices teach us the most important things that are withheld by the dominant group, without which we cannot get out, these things are that we matter, that we deserve decent lives, that we cannot and will not tolerate the way we are treated, that we will change things, and as my mother always said, that paybacks are hell. Without her voice and the voices of the women I have met in academia, DOING activism, acting up, acting out, no matter the consequences, I would be sitting in the hood instead of speaking at conferences, freezing and starving instead of sitting in my office in new clothes having just been fed, degraded and humiliated instead of using my voice and being listened to. This is my proof that is not only the upper middle class who can learn from or be impacted by their history. I have learned to force others to give me my due, good or bad, to know that I can, and that I have to make a difference so that hopefully not many more will have to live the life I have lived.

Thus far I have examined some theoretical work about oppression and looked at both actual activism and at elitist concepts held about activism and the dispossessed. I will now attempt navigate

ways to reestablish the concrete histories of our activism and to further activism within groups of women in poverty. The first goal, at second glance is not a goal. Women in poverty have concrete histories of their experiences with activism; one cannot reestablish a history that exists. It is the oppressor who refuses to hear us, leading back to my epigraph, if they refuse to hear us they do not have to deal with us as human beings, or so they believe. Still, here, there is no question of reestablishing our activism, it has yet to be established, the problem here is to force recognition of it. It seems that the second goal falls to the same fate, women living in poverty engage in activism as a piece of survival on a daily basis, when a young woman with a baby demands the means with which to care for the baby, when a young woman caring for an ill mother has to hustle ways to get the needed medical necessities by going against the “laws” of dominant society, by showing her refusal to internalize the “values” of a society that withholds necessities. Activism in these women is engaged in in a myriad of ways every day.

It seems that the real goal here is to force the acknowledgement of these types of activism in order to end the deprivation that causes the need for it. One could try to work within the system to make this happen, but because the system has been set up to cause the deprivation of some for the benefit of others it seems as if one cannot use it to acknowledge and end deprivation because in doing so the system would be annihilated and those benefiting from it will not willingly be a party to that. Frantz Fanon believes that there can be no working from within, that the only way to end a harmful system is to annihilate it in much the same way it annihilates the Other on a daily basis (58). This, I believe, can be done only by continuing to resist dominant culture and its harm and by gathering together, as Maria Lugones suggests, to teach and to learn more forms of resistance (209). If enough of us come together loudly enough for long enough I believe that we can force the needed change. As my mother often said if you are loud enough for long enough they will finally relent, if only to shut you up. There is a problem with though and that is that we do not have a long time to work with, concrete

people are suffering in the present. Perhaps the missing link here is, as Lugones says, to come together in numbers, to form communities of resistance. I believe that if we come together both in the streets and in the academy in groups with loud voices perhaps the needed change can come about in an expedited fashion.

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