

Activisms and Epistemologies

Problems for Transnationalisms

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Collective social movements are incubators of new knowledge.

—Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*

In the summer of 2006, the opening night of a conference, the Tepoztlán Institute for Transnational History, included one of the more memorable events of my life in academe: seventy-five scholars from the United States and Mexico, sitting at tables after dinner, singing “Solidarity Forever.” Judging from the reactions around me, the event registered varying degrees of earnestness—many of us have deep and substantive connections with labor movements, including, especially in the last decade, graduate teaching assistant organizing in U.S. universities—and uneasiness—from camp to irony to comments about the weirdness of well-off academics ventriloquizing themselves as workers. It was fun and funny, but also just awkward enough to be intriguing.

I suspect that our various reactions to this event are related to our understandings, as scholars, of our relation to political movements. The vintage of “Solidarity Forever” is to a moment in the early part of the twentieth century when intellectuals were far more comfortable understanding themselves as in solidarity with an international workers’ movement, as a set of common political commitments and a strategy for both activism and writing. Even in the present, many of us carry our own historical and current participation in activism.¹ And we have seen that scholar-activist alliances give rise to academic work that is smarter because it is informed by the thinking of activist movements. For example, something that distinguished

one of the earliest books in the field that became the history of women in the United States, Linda Gordon's *Woman's Body, Woman's Right*, was that it emerged in conversation with an internationalist reproductive rights movement with a critique of "population control." As a result, it was provocatively different from comparable works on the birth control movement, launching it into a stirring fight that helped found a field. More recently, Andrea Smith's spectacular scholarship on sexual violence against indigenous women in the United States as a tactic of colonialism diverges sharply from much other work on colonial violence because it is part of broader activist conversations in INCITE! Women of Color against Violence. Or, to cite a classic example, Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* was not only a scholarly, intellectual effort to make sense of the psychology of the intimately interdependent relationship of colonized and colonizer, and its transformation in the context of liberation struggles, but also clearly could not have been written except in conversation with the anticolonial movement of Algeria—and it left a profound and lasting mark on anti-imperialist scholarship and activism.

We could name countless other examples of feminist, antiracist, and anticolonialist work, bodies of scholarship whose very existence is indebted to activist movements. Yet while this work is a testament to the possibilities of activist and scholarly collaboration, others point to abuses. Although many continue to resist its implications, we cannot return to a moment before Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's acid critique of the politics of scholars "speaking for" subalternized voices. Her ringing denunciation of what happens when we ignore the participation of intellectuals in the ideologies of the ruling class finds echoes among us and accounts for some of our uneasiness as we sang that old Wobblies anthem.

In this article, I want to lay out some preliminary thoughts on the relationship of activism and progressive academic scholarship, thinking in particular (but not exclusively) about recent developments in the feminist study of neoliberalism. Feminist scholarship makes a good focus for these concerns because it is both exemplary of strong and self-conscious activist roots, and of late, a conspicuous and provocative estrangement particularly in relationship to its understanding of where the critique of neoliberalism comes from. Since the 1970s, work by feminists in academe has been framed against a normative backdrop (whatever the reality) that our work in some broad sense is indebted to activism, that activists are intellectuals, and feminist scholar-activists have work to do to transform the broader cultural conversation about gender, sexuality, and justice, which has too often in recent years been turned into a mindless celebration of women by a social and corporate formation I sometimes want to call Feminism, Inc., that tells us a lot about how women are different, and run with wolves, and can become successful executives. We in the academy have been about

something a bit different. In this moment, if I read the proliferation of jobs and courses called “transnational feminism” correctly, we have taken up neoliberal globalization as one of our targets.

While the dangers of self-righteous and obfuscating invocations of “activism” are real enough, there are equal or greater dangers on the other side: that we are taken in by the neoliberal transnationalist or nationalist ideologies of our class, institutional, or disciplinary locations, on the one hand, or that we commit the intellectual dishonesty of appropriating the collective, hard-won insights of political movements as our own. I want to point to an interlocking set of theoretical and historical problems in how scholars have dealt with activism. While that moment of singing “Solidarity Forever” suggests that one theory of how activism and intellectual work ought to be related to each other—that intellectuals should be promoting activist agendas—no longer serves us well, we have not offered anything in its place. At the same time, I want to notice that academics are overlooking real and helpful contributions from activism to the very problems we are working on. My basic suspicion is that our account of activism has been at once too much and not enough. That is, we give activists or oppressed people too much credit for always having a good analysis of their situation and always resisting it, something that often gets expressed through the term *agency*, on the one hand, and too little credit for their intellectual work, on the other hand. We find our relationship to activism bound by the danger of romanticism on the one hand and intellectual elitism on the other. I want to start what I hope might be a different kind of conversation about how to engage with political movements as a specifically intellectual practice, to understand what academics do as different in degree but not always in kind from what activists do.

I want to begin to explore these conundrums by way of Spivak, whose relentless lack of romanticism about the subject-in-revolution is bracing, even to the point of offending (women’s and ethnic studies folk in particular, I suspect, but we were, after all, the target: those she accused of wanting to restore a collective, unitary “voice” to the subalterns of the past). At the risk of rehearsing an argument that is already extremely well known, I want to look briefly at “Can the Subaltern Speak?” which is primarily about the relationship of activists and intellectuals, although oddly, I can’t recall seeing it discussed as such. I want to put it in conversation with a somewhat lesser-known essay, “Cultural Talk in the Hot Peace: Revisiting the ‘Global Village,’” in Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins’s *Cosmopolitics*.

“Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) begins with a conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, in which Foucault claims that “the masses *know* perfectly well, clearly. . . . they know far better than [the intellectual] and they certainly say it very well.”² Here, Spivak argues, Foucault is suggesting that the nature of social structures is immediately

graspable, easily articulable, at least in the context of working-class resistance. Deleuze adds: “reality is what actually happens in a factory, in a school, in barracks, in a prison, in a police station.”³ What has happened here? These two exemplars of rigorous, postmodernist intellectual work that assumes the nontransparency of both social structure and subjectivity—from Marxist and psychoanalytic lines of analysis, respectively—have suddenly become champions of positivism in the tradition of Auguste Comte. This is the epistemology of positivist, empiricist science and social science: reality is immediately graspable, people know exactly what has happened—Deleuze and Foucault are channeling scientific method in postmodernist drag. This is more than just peculiar, in Spivak’s view, but politically dangerous; she calls positivism “the justifying foundation of advanced capitalist neocolonialism.”⁴ Intellectuals who know better begin saying the strangest things in the face of activism; they genuflect, and the effect is to undermine the very politics that matter to them (Maoism, for Deleuze in this interview). Yet as I understand it, her critique here is not that the problem is that scholars are speaking about activists rather than doing the proper intellectual work of academics. Rather, it is that they see activism as a site where thinking stops. The “foreclosing of the necessity of the difficult task of counterhegemonic ideological production has not been salutary,” she writes, arguing that an unreflective brandishing of “raw” experience and the “raw” consciousness of “the worker” in the first world can consolidate the international division of labor.⁵

In contrast, in “Cultural Talk in the Hot Peace” (1998), Spivak distinguishes between the rhetoric of neoliberal NGOs and other, more productive political movements and consciousnesses that offer a vision of a more ethical world, that situate themselves in opposition to development ideology. The overwhelming impact of NGOs and their view of the world, she argues, is to support development and contribute to the “financialization of the globe”; elsewhere she points to microcredit loans to women as a paradigmatic example. Drawing everyone into global capitalism has several predictable effects. First, some of the people who borrow money will be unable to pay it back, and they will fall into endless cycles of debt, while those who sell commodities to the poor are the primary beneficiaries. Second, she suggests, there is the cultural correlate: the production of compassion and pity toward poor women produces other effects. From the right, delivering ethnicized “women” as a commodity contributes to producing them as a hyperexploitable workforce. On the left, she argues that it produces a national or racial solidarity that denies cleavages within the “other” society (say, India), eviscerating the possibility of talking about sexist exploitation, for example, while opening the way for a hybrid, migratory bourgeoisie to produce the ethnicized, female, poor as the subject of its own (cultural or economic) surplus value—the art show, the film, the

fundraiser for poor, victimized women. Finally, she argues, the ways that NGOs open up fragile national economies to the ravages of the global economy is not a good thing for those economies in general, and natural resources in particular. Spivak holds out hope for a contrasting vision of globality, though—“globe-girdling” political movements that tie different people and places together through the solidarities of an antidevelopment, antiglobalization movement. She points to Christian Liberation Theology as an intriguing and productive (nonnationalist) solidarity and longs for the possibility of an animist liberation theology building a globe-girdling, ecological solidarity movement, drawing together fisher-folk in India, with, say, indigenous Guatemalans fighting mining.⁶ Or, alternatively, she points to the work of feminist networks opposed to population control, who refuse the analysis of the social scientists of population control that impoverished women in the most powerless places on the planet are responsible for the failure of national and international economies to produce wealth for all the world’s people, on the one hand, and the exhaustion of the world’s natural resources, on the other.

In this second piece, then, Spivak offers up activist groups and networks as the repository of a different, antiglobalization consciousness. It is important to read these two articles together, to counter the charge that what Spivak does in “Subaltern” is to covertly reintroduce vanguardist politics (under the guise of rejecting it). What the two pieces together produce is a necessary tension—defending the importance of intellectual work as such on the one hand and the brilliant innovations of political movements on the other. In “Subaltern,” Spivak is railing against the romanticism that imagines that exploitation itself produces an epistemological privilege. On the contrary, she argues, it produces horrors—marginalization, loss, failure, betrayal, suicide. This was and is an important corrective to arguments about the agency of “women,” “workers,” or “the oppressed” in fields like women’s studies, ethnic studies, and social history. On the other hand, she argues, the counterhegemonic intellectual work of antiglobalization movements of diverse sorts has been crucial to the elaboration of an alternative to neoliberalism and development.

Indeed, not only *can* we ascribe ideas to political movements, but we must and should; when we fail to acknowledge the intellectual work of movements, something crucial is lost. My point is not just the ethical one—in an academic world whose constitutive building block is the citable idea, always presumed to be attributable to an individual (however implausible that may in fact be)—borrowing ideas and calling them one’s own is theft, plagiarism. If that is true in relation to our powerful, PhD-ed peers who can catch us at it and wreak hell on our lives if we do it to them, then it is a matter of simple justice to do it for political movements, even if we cannot be “caught” or punished. But even more, there are consequences

in forgetting, distorting, and silencing if we cannot figure out how to take seriously the intellectual work of political movements.

We are better at marking the intellectual contribution of the 1930s than we are of the more recent past, in part, because, in that moment when “Solidarity Forever” was a song sung by intellectuals, it is easier to see the specifically theoretical innovations of activists. For example, in her provocative *Harriot Stanton Blatch and the Winning of Woman Suffrage*, historian Ellen DuBois argues that cross-class alliances between trade union women and elite women and a broad, inclusive socialist vision of politics were crucial to the winning of suffrage and the elaboration of feminism in the early twentieth century. From the 1920s to the 1940s, while the major contemporary currents of feminism were being forged (“equality” versus “difference,” as recent feminist debate has it), Harriot Stanton Blatch was arguing for a third way, one that put women’s economic equality at the center of a feminist politics that held, DuBois argues, more liberatory potential than either of the alternatives.⁷ In forgetting even the name of Blatch, DuBois suggests, we have lost a radical alternative to a domesticated feminism.

This is a striking argument because it is emerging as a theme in a heterogeneous body of scholarship—that by forgetting the radicalism of the movements of the 1930s, we have lost something important in the present, something that disallows certain forms of political protest and permits some kinds of exploitative social formations to flourish. Historian of Guatemala Greg Grandin makes a similar point in *The Last Colonial Massacre*, although he argues that some of this historical rewriting was done by the left itself. The New Left of the 1960s dismissed the “Old Left” because of its involvement with state projects, from the New Deal in the United States to the October Revolution in Guatemala (of 1944) and other post-War, left-liberal social democratic states of Latin America. The point of this dismissal in the 1960s, of course, was to advocate armed revolution rather than gradualist approaches; postgenocidal sobriety in Guatemala might force a reevaluation of that position. Minimally, though, Grandin invites us to notice the power of leftists in the Latin American liberal coalitions in the 1940s to prevent massacres and wholesale repression of agrarian cooperatives, labor, and other grassroots left initiatives. Michael Denning, similarly, argues in *The Cultural Front* that by the 1960s, we had come to dismiss the work of the Popular Front as simply “bad art,” forgetting its extraordinary work in transforming the perception of working-class people in U.S. American culture, championing the causes of refugees, African Americans, Chicanos, labor in general, and rural and poor people.⁸ We are impoverished by the loss of this memory of the political power of artists and intellectuals in solidarity with disenfranchised people. We have become embarrassed to sing “Solidarity Forever.”

I make this point about the relationship of the 1930s and the 1960s, not only because our misremembering of the radicalism of the 1930s may have served to obscure or domesticate effective political tactics, but also because liberals and leftists in the United States in the present moment seem to be engaged in a similar process with respect to movements against neoliberalism in the global south in the 1980s and 1990s. First, I would submit that there is (at last) gathering outrage in the United States about the stunning acceleration in recent years of the widening of the gap between rich and poor. New Orleans is a symbol, as is the health care crisis and the battle over minimum wage, of the number of U.S. Americans without access to basic services and the opportunity to earn a living wage. The liberal-conservative consensus in favor of neoliberalism, brought to us by Bill Clinton as much as Ronald Reagan, appears to be stumbling just a bit, in significant part through the revolting excesses of Bush's neoliberalism—privatizing the functions of the military, going to war, and watching his cronies get rich; offering huge tax cuts for the richest U.S. Americans while cutting health care services to people with disabilities and the impoverished. And while it has not crystallized around any particular issue (unless, God help us, it is about figures like Bono or celebrity adoption of children in Africa), there is a growing unease in the United States that all is not well in our relations with the global south, particularly the Middle East, but not exclusively. Among liberals, we have not definitively reached a tipping point with respect to neoliberalism, but perhaps we are trending in that direction (and perhaps not; there is no end to the capacity of liberals to disappoint).

Feminists are conspicuous among those in the United States who are analyzing and criticizing neoliberalism. These include a range of scholar-activists, such as journalist Naomi Klein in *The Shock Doctrine*, where she is not afraid to be an intellectual (in contrast to so much of what passes for journalistic commentary these days), to scholars like Lisa Duggan in *Twilight of Equality?*⁹ in which she explicitly locates her interest in neoliberalism in her own activist roots.⁹ But among many left-feminist scholars and others who might carry these ideas to a wider audience, in Spivak's sense of activist-intellectual, counterhegemonic ideological work, there is nevertheless a startling amnesia about the work of activists-intellectuals in the global south, with a resulting weakness in our ability to think clearly about the issues. I am thinking here about how feminist intellectuals are constructing an account of neoliberalism. And let me be clear: this is work I admire, that I think is tremendously important to our ability to think transnationalism. And it is precisely for that reason that I am impatient with what it forgets.

To take only one among countless examples: In a 2005 article, feminist theorist Nancy Fraser suggests a new narrative about the broad

paradigm shifts in recent decades in feminism, one I find provocative and interesting. She argues that in the 1960s, U.S. feminism emerged in relationship to other “new social movements,” in part as an argument against a strictly economist version of what the left should do. This was critical, as feminists and antiracists had to insist that they were *not* going to wait until “after the revolution.” As the New Left waned, however, the anti-economism of feminism was resignified, drawing it into the orbit of identity politics in the 1980s and 1990s. She suggests that an emergent formation, principally in Europe, has produced a “transnational feminism” that joins it to antiglobalization and antineoliberalism efforts. This is all well and good, and to the extent that it is overly schematic, Fraser is well aware of this potential problem, but suggests that the usefulness of such broad paradigmatic insights is worth the cost, and I concur. The problem, as I see it, is with centering antineoliberal movements in Europe, a problem she compounds by suggesting that these epochs do not reflect a particularly U.S. chronology. In the third world, she argues, structural adjustment policies and the dismantling of the Bretton Woods framework were a disaster for the developmentalist state. True enough. But she continues: “The response was an enormous surge of identity politics in the post-colony, much of it communalist and authoritarian. Thus, postcolonial feminist movements, too, were forced to operate without a background political culture that guided popular aspirations into egalitarian channels.” Feminists, she suggested, allied themselves either with neoliberal state projects or this authoritarian communalist identity politics.¹⁰

Even if she were only reading Spivak, a diasporic intellectual and another major feminist theorist in the United States, Fraser should know better (recall that the articles I discussed above, advocating a feminist antiglobalization project, are from 1988 and 1998, the exact decades Fraser is saying that feminists were *not* involved in such politics). To say that Fraser’s is a bad account of Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s barely scratches the surface. While it is certainly true that there were feminists who allied themselves with state projects of neoliberalism, it is equally true that feminisms were part of every left movement in Latin America. And far from a neoliberalism and globalization imposed from without (in Fraser’s account, the third world is a passive victim of the dismantling of structural adjustment policies), it would seem more accurate to say that antineoliberalism and neoliberalism, globalization and antiglobalization, grew up together in the clashes of left and right in Latin America. From Pinochet’s Chile to the birth of the “global assembly line” in the development policies of Puerto Rico, an ideological battle that was anything but divorced from views of economic policy was being fought up and down the Americas. The Central American civil/imperial wars were above all about the imposition of neoliberalism, as we can see clearly from the policies of

the winners. While the socialisms that opposed it were internally heterogeneous movements, to reduce them to an authoritarian communalist identity politics, devoid of “egalitarian channels,” seems shockingly unfair. First, it is not clear to me what if anything they have to do with “identity politics,” as I understand the term. Second, to state the obvious, the basic building blocks of these movements included unions, neighborhood and community organizations, agrarian cooperatives, women’s collectives, Christian base communities, Freirean educational initiatives, and, as Grandin writes, the dream of “democracy” that was “not a procedural constitutionalism but a felt experience of individual sovereignty and social solidarity”¹¹—in short, some of the most egalitarian institutions and ideologies of the twentieth century in this hemisphere.

One of the first movement accounts of neoliberalism I have seen comes out of the Central American wars. It is a popular education piece produced by Equipo Maiz, the popular front of the FMLN in El Salvador, in 1989. With three years left in the civil war in El Salvador, Equipo Maiz’s piece argued that what was at stake was neoliberalism, “the mechanism to create more poor people among the poor.” Based on work being done at the University of Central America (that Jesuit center of radicalism) and a photocopied version of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, it puts structural adjustment in conversation with economists like Friedrich Hayek, one of the crucial European architects of neoliberalism (pictured, in the accompanying drawing, as standing on a pile of skulls). The piece was enormously popular and traveled all over Latin America (mine comes from Mexico) before being translated into Portuguese, Italian, and English, as it moved to Europe; every year between 1992 and 2001, a new and updated version was put out. And the 1992 edition of Equipo Maiz’s *El Neoliberalismo* contained a heartbreaking afterword: “When they were about to sign the Peace Accords [in El Salvador], we thought maybe it would not be necessary to put out this piece; because we thought the neoliberal program of the ARENA [party] was to be abandoned. But the accords did not contemplate a new economic model.”¹² As late as that, it was possible to hope that neoliberalism could be consigned to the dustbin of history, an unfortunate artifact of the Cold War. How wrong that proved to be.

Or again, in 1990, there was another group working in a different Jesuit, liberation-theology inflected university in Central America—the collective in Managua at the Instituto Histórico Centroamericano and the Universidad Centroamericana—which published *Revista Envío*, a magazine of commentary and analysis published simultaneously in Spanish, English, French, and German, for solidarity movements outside Central America as much as for popular education in Nicaragua. For them, though, neoliberalism came suddenly, all at once; they began writing about the “neoliberal economic model” in 1990, as something that the United States

and the Nicaraguan elite (in the form of the UNO party) were trying to impose on the country in the aftermath of the loss of the elections by the Sandinistas. (Interestingly, seven of the eight members of the collective were women.) Ironically, they pointed out, after the Reagan and Bush administrations had spent billions to dismantle the Sandinista government and its experiments with agrarian reform, it shortchanged the UNO government (because Jesse Helms and his allies thought it was not far enough to the right) and let the country's economy disintegrate anyway.

Nicaragua offered an ideal opportunity for the United States to show the world that substituting a neoliberal economic model for "communism" translates into economic prosperity for the people. Selling this line is too costly and not very convincing in the Eastern European case. Those countries need billions of dollars to effect industrial and commercial transformation, without making major cuts in the social services their people have become accustomed to. It would have been just as costly and perhaps less feasible to demonstrate that neoliberalism equals prosperity in the critically impoverished African nations. Nicaragua, on the other hand, would have been cheap and relatively easy. The depth of the economic crisis and accompanying deterioration in the country's infrastructure notwithstanding, the resources required to make Nicaragua a showcase for U.S. democracy would not have been excessive: the UNO government had calculated \$1.8 billion over three years.¹³

They were right—this was the first indication that this was a sea change from the development policy years. Dominant countries, parties, and classes were not even going to throw impoverished people a bone.¹⁴

And to look at the work at the University of Central America is to make a related point: the redistributive state that neoliberalism crushed was as much aspirational as it was an existing state. Some have objected to neoliberalism's critique, saying that the "before" privatization that it imagines, in which the state was accountable and had to provide services to its citizens, never in fact happened. In some places, like Mexico and western Europe, neoliberalism is a movement against an actual vision of the state, however good or bad it may have been in practice. In other places, like El Salvador and Guatemala (and even Nicaragua, as the Sandinistas were constantly faced with a transnational war that hamstrung their ability to realize the model they sought), it was a campaign against a dream, a state that those who struggled on the left imagined but did not realize. The United States is somewhere in between, a place where on the one hand there was a vision of a redistributive state imagined by some elements of a broad New Deal coalition, but on the other there was always such a vigorous and militant "markets just want to be free" sector that it never quite came to fruition, and those pieces that did get put into place have been systemati-

cally crushed by Republican and Democrat free-market fundamentalists alike since about 1980.

To point to resistance to neoliberalism in Chile in 1973, or El Salvador in 1989, or Nicaragua in 1990 is not yet to make the most obvious argument, that more recently, in the mid- and late 1990s, much of the activism and theorizing of a radical, democratic position against neoliberalism centered in and around the Zapatista movement, beginning in 1994. Where Fraser's account has U.S. feminists and leftists learning a new politics from European movements in the first decade after 2000, Naomi Klein offers a different account, one that seems much more familiar to me—and she locates it a decade earlier. In the aftermath of the uprising in Chiapas on the morning of the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement/Tratado de Libre Comercio (NAFTA/TLC), Klein writes, she saw “Zapatistas’ ideas spread through activist circles, passed along second- and third-hand: a phrase, a way to run a meeting, a metaphor that twists your brain around . . . Chiapas was transformed, despite its poverty, despite being constantly under military siege, into a global gathering place for activists, intellectuals, and indigenous groups,” a role it has not entirely relinquished more than a decade later.¹⁵ The Zapatistas gathered people from all over the world, not only to protect themselves (sometimes unsuccessfully) from military and paramilitary attack, but to teach—a style of politics, a philosophy, a form of analysis. The summer after the uprising, the Zapatistas hosted a National Convention in Oventic; six thousand people attended, mostly from Mexico. In 1996, they hosted the Encuentro for Humanity and against Neoliberalism, and three thousand people traveled to Chiapas from around the world. “Many who attended the first ‘encuentros,’” continues Klein, “went on to play key roles in the protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle and the World Bank and IMF in Washington, D.C., arriving with new taste for direct action, for collective decision-making and decentralized organizing.”¹⁶ María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, similarly, argues that the *encuentros* dramatically and performatively staged an identification (which she contrasts with a solidarity) between indigenous Zapatistas and visitors that reframed and recentered questions of neoliberalism:

For we, the many of us Western and Westernized subjects present, in the habit of thinking of ourselves as freely constituted and purposeful individuals, had also been subjected by neoliberalism. In the “First World,” we too had experienced a less violent, but by no means less virulent, structural adjustment in the 1980s and 1990s, disguised by such regionalisms as Reaganism or Thatcherism. And certainly, as leftists and progressives of various stripes and positions, from various “developed” countries, we had found our criticisms equally muted by the triumph of post-Cold War neoliberalism—more effectively, in fact, than criticism in Mexico.¹⁷

Like Klein, Saldaña-Portillo sees Zapatismo teaching purposeful first-world subjects a new analysis of neoliberalism. Indeed, even the Rand Corporation, in a study of the Zapatistas commissioned for the U.S. military, saw the extensive and rapid dissemination of Zapatista ideas as its principal threat. The EZLN represent “a new mode of conflict—‘netwar’—in which the protagonists depend on using network forms of organization, doctrine, strategy, and technology,” turning “a war of the flea” into “a war of the swarm.”¹⁸ Zapatismo was also hugely influential in Europe, especially in EU anarchist and antiglobalization circles (think of the massive solidarity efforts in Italy, for example, or French/Spanish artist Manu Chao’s including the words of Zapatista leader Comandante David on his hugely popular album of 1998, *Clandestino*).

While it is not my intention here to insist that *all* antineoliberal activism and theorizing in the 1990s came from Chiapas or even Latin America, it does seem a significant oversight by Fraser to look only to Europe. But I am not picking on her; there have been a host of similar entrées in recent years by prominent political theorists of the U.S. left, who rely on insights and forms of analysis that seem deeply familiar from “third-world” intellectual-political developments, but barely cite them, and when they do, it is often to describe their insights as partial at best, mistaken at worst.¹⁹ At a conference on “Fetishizing the Free Market: The Cultural Politics of Neoliberalism” in April 2005 at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, one participant noted that the entire discussion had proceeded as if the critique of neoliberalism was a U.S. phenomenon, as if there were not powerful movements against it throughout the world.²⁰ This is not good. Because if there has been, as I suspect, along with Klein, a capillary effect of ideas about neoliberalism traveling through activist circles from Chiapas to the United States to the halls of academe, these ideas have nevertheless been relatively circumscribed in their dissemination. And if those of us in the U.S. teaching machine, with easy access to publication, are giving these ideas back to intellectuals and students stripped of their activist provenance, we are losing something significant and powerful.

The problem here is not just that these oversights are unfair, that they overlook the blood shed and the difficult political-intellectual work of Zapatismo and other Latin American political movements. Rather, it is that it leads the left in the United States—feminist and otherwise—into a trap that Wendy Brown diagnoses (in another article on neoliberalism that fails to credit third-world activists and intellectuals as contributing to that analysis). To the extent that the U.S. left has failed to look south, to be inspired or take courage from Latin American movements against neoliberalism, it has taken up a politics of retrenchment. As Brown argues, the malaise on the U.S. left has taken the form of an embrace of its old ideological enemies, what leftists used to see as the false promises of lib-

eralism—formal, legal equality rather than substantive equality in the economic sphere; the regulation of poverty through the welfare state rather than its eradication; an embrace of legal formalism rather than a full-scale assault on ideological obfuscation. While Brown implicitly parts company with DuBois, Denning, and Grandin over the utility of a left alliance with liberals in a way I would not—I suspect these scholars are correct about the 1930s—Brown is diagnosing a slightly different phenomenon: the ways the U.S. Left has ceased to *be* a left, browbeating those who failed to vote for Al Gore in 2000, worrying about the cost of antiwar protests to cash-strapped municipalities, wondering out loud if the advocacy of gay marriage in 2003 had cost the Democrats the election in 2004 (*marriage*, for crying out loud; could the terms of protest have been any more muted?). In other words, while the Left in the rest of the world has been opposing neoliberalism, in the United States, the Left has been trying to prop up a collapsing liberalism, seduced into the belief that market logic is the only politically viable terrain on which to struggle. Brown is absolutely right that the U.S. Left has come late to a critique of neoliberalism, relative to the rest of the world, and to arrive at it without a recognition of the activist movements that nurtured it seems beyond distressing, as it leaves the U.S. Left chasing the tail of a vanishing liberalism, without the imagination of something different.

So this brings me around, finally, to the problem in my own work that got me here: how to credit the ideas, the contributions of activist movements that taught me things. In my first book, *Reproducing Empire*, this problem was rather more easily resolved. That book was nurtured in an internationalist reproductive rights movement and an AIDS activist movement, with lots of cross-fertilization from the Puerto Rico *independentista* solidarity movement. It was a milieu as fully part of my intellectual formation as the air that I breathed. My new work on adoption was also formed in the crucible of political movements—from Bastard Nation in the United States to the human rights movements to locate disappeared children in El Salvador and Guatemala to indigenous activism in Mexico, the United States, and Guatemala. The difference, though, is that I sought out these movements—as writings, as Web sites, in short-term encounters—to expose me to counterhegemonic ideologies, to offer that edge of intellectual ferment and new ideas. I am unlikely to again be young enough, poor enough, unemployed enough that I can count myself a full participant in activist movements—as a location I inhabit, not a thing I do. This is not a guilty question of whether I go to enough meetings—I go to antiwar marches, give talks to political groups, organize events at my university, take water to migrants in the desert. Yet however strongly I may feel about my political commitments, it is all comfortably remote; this is the division in my life that marks me as a middle-class intellectual. The location I *do*

inhabit makes me more than casually complicit in neoliberal globalization; my paycheck and my comforts depend on it. My work at the University of Arizona and my benefits (in the sense of funding for my department, the library in which I read Spivak, the computer on which I wrote this) are made possible by funding from Raytheon, the Department of Defense, the Department of Homeland Security (we have recently become a “center of excellence” in border security); my college is setting up a for-profit educational center in China; the subcontracted workers who clean the buildings where I teach eke out an impoverished existence with no benefits and can be exploited in this way largely because they were born in Mexico or Guatemala. And I work for an excruciatingly underfunded university in a dusty border city; we are hardly the most implicated.

What I am talking about, then, is figuring out how to write a politics of solidarity or identification from such admittedly compromised locations, which is different from trying to speak *for* a movement or even *from* a political movement. The point is not just putting one’s body on the line, not assuming that the worker “*knows*, perfectly well.” On the contrary, it is to respect the intellectual labor of political movements as such, to disagree with those positions that do not make sense, while recognizing that movements also have been, in Robin Kelley’s words, “incubators of new knowledge.” But to turn again to Spivak, we cannot “disown with a flourish,” in her memorable phrase, the work of the [female] “intellectual as intellectual.”²¹ Our work is to do our intellectual labor alongside the intellectual labor of political movements.

This is of course not a new thought; while it seems to me that there is a particular need at this moment for us to recognize the activist provenance of intellectual work on neoliberalism, other scholars have long done the work of holding up and contesting the intellectual work of political and social movements. For example, out of this milieu but of a slightly earlier moment, Diane Nelson, in *Finger in the Wound*, explores the consequences of the *gringa* solidarity politics in which she participated in Guatemala and concludes that one of its legacies was to shore up revolutionary political formations that deserved sharper critique for the ways they articulated gender, for example, or ethnicity; she suggests a more complex politics of *fluidarity* that does not insist that the social and political formations with which we engage are “solid.” Saldaña-Portillo, in her stunning *Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development*, does for the “development” era exactly what I am suggesting needs to be done for the neoliberal moment: provides it with an intellectual genealogy that is rooted in activism (as well as hegemonic structures like the World Bank), and suggests both some of the strengths and some of the weaknesses of those intellectual models.²² Indeed, these two books may well have been part of what was making my colleagues in Tepoztlán anxious as we sang

“Solidarity Forever”; these critiques of the limitations of “solidarity” have been as formative as the work on the limitations of representations of subalternity, especially for U.S.-based scholars of Latin America. Or, from the side of Mexican interlocutors, the awkwardness of questions about the politics of solidarity that were being raised in deeply thoughtful ways at that moment, given what was effectively an estrangement between progressive left intellectuals in Mexico and the Zapatistas (most conspicuously at that time in the support of those like Elena Poniatowska and the left newspaper *La Jornada*, who had opposed the position of the Zapatistas and supported the presidential candidacy of Andrés Manuel López Obrador—AMLO—whose backers were in the street at the time declaring the election a fraud). Poniatowska, a feminist and public intellectual, has long done the work of amplifying the volume on the intellectual labor of political movements through her thoughtful and critical essays and had gone from being a visible and vocal participant in Zapatismo to being a spokesperson for AMLO.²³ This is the kind of uneasiness about solidarity politics that is necessary and productive; it is quite different from the kinds of work that ignores—or genuflects at—the thinking of political movements.

To put this in terms of my work on adoption, then, my task is to name the intellectual labor of these movements as fully and carefully as I am able, to develop also a written genealogy of the development of these ideas—one to which we might hold hugely influential, monolingual English-speaking scholars a bit more accountable. This means, for example, naming the political formations from which I have learned to think about adoption as always in relation to neoliberalism, for example, to refugees, to political disappearances. I need to uncover the specific circumstances that gave rise to this way of theorizing adoption, the interlocutors, as it were, who produced it—the military and secret police, in this instance. And then to notice in my own work as an intellectual whether a movement’s way of thinking through one situation has been productive for others. Or, similarly, to trace back what made me start to ask about adoption in relation to histories of the Spanish Civil War, its legacies, positive and negative, to what I learned in Oventic in Chiapas, and how and when I started to wonder if the contemporary discourse of “interracialism” in relation to transnational adoption was also working as a cover story for the exchange of children as pseudocommodities, or to notice that it was only *some* peoples, even among those who were immensely impoverished, whose lives and livelihoods were so disrupted that their children were being adopted out. And if this sounds cumbersome, not to be able to simply borrow ideas or apply ways of thinking, sometimes to quite disparate situations, it is not really any more of a burden than chasing ideas from, say, Foucault to Althusser to Marx, or the work of a wide swath of historians in the United States to E. P. Thompson.

Or, still again, to locate what I am saying in relation to feminist transnational, antineoliberal theorizing and historical work, I am arguing that we need to do a different kind of scholarly writing. We need to name the intellectual labor of political movements. Movements have intellectual genealogies and intellectual production as surely as the theorists and historians we much more easily cite, although they are rarely “single authored” (neither are ours, if we only dared to admit it). The work of researching these genealogies and the development of their intellectual traditions is, I am arguing, not fungible, but necessary. This might, of course, require that we also begin to train our students differently, to teach them political genealogies and social movement histories in “theory” or “historiography” seminars. I believe that this would produce better work, but above all, that it is a scholarly practice that is ethical, honest, and productive.

Notes

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1. And, one could certainly argue, this generation of academics has an ever-receding horizon of control over our wages and working conditions, particularly in publicly funded universities, and would benefit immensely from greater participation in labor activism on our own behalf. Fortunately for the conference, veterans of the GESO struggle at Yale have been overrepresented among its members. For more on the GESO struggle, see Cary Nelson, *Will Teach for Food: Academic Labor in Crisis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 274.

3. *Ibid.*, 275.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Cultural Talk in the Hot Peace: Revisiting the ‘Global Village,’” in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, ed. Pheng Cheah, Bruce Robbins, and Social Text Collective (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 329–350.

7. Ellen Carol DuBois, *Harriot Stanton Blatch and the Winning of Woman Suffrage* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

8. Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996).

9. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 2007); Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 2003).

10. Nancy Fraser, “Mapping the Feminist Imagination: From Redistribution to Representations,” *Constellations* 12 (2005): 300.

11. Grandin, *Last Colonial Massacre*, 4.
12. Translation mine. Equipo Maíz, *El Neoliberalismo (Neoliberalism)* (San Salvador: Criterion, 1992). The 2001 edition tells the story of the pamphlet's extraordinary circulation. José Victor Aguilar, *El Neoliberalismo* (San Salvador: Asociación Equipo Maíz, 2001).
13. "The International Limits of Concertación," *Revista Envío*, December 1990, 3–9.
14. As they well knew. In an article on "The Neoliberal Model in Central America: The Gospel of the New Right" a year later, the *Envío* collective forecast the impoverishment of most (though precisely not all) people that in fact subsequently did take place as a result of neoliberalism in Central America, and noted that "the word 'development' has disappeared from Latin America's economic vocabulary." *Revista Envío*, April 1991, 9–13.
15. Naomi Klein, "The Unknown Icon," in *¡Ya Basta!—Ten Years of the Zapatista Uprising*, ed. Žiga Vodovnik (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2004), 18.
16. *Ibid.*, 19.
17. María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 194.
18. Cited in Klein, "Unknown Icon," 19–20.
19. See, e.g., David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford, 2005); Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," *Theory and Event* 7 (2003): 1–43.
20. Thanks to Sandy Soto for this last example.
21. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 25.
22. Saldaña-Portillo, *Revolutionary Imagination*; Diane M. Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincentennial Guatemala* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
23. Elena Poniatowska, *La noche de Tlatelolco: Testimonios de historia oral (The Night of Tlatelolco: Testimonies of Oral History)* (Mexico City: Era, 1971); Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Mexico), Carlos Monsiváis, and Elena Poniatowska, *EZLN: Documentos y comunicados (EZLN: Documents and Official Notices)* (Mexico City: Era, 1994); Elena Poniatowska, *Amanecer en el Zócalo: Los 50 días que confrontaron México (Dawn in the Zócalo: Fifty Days That Confronted Mexico)* (Mexico City: Planeta, 2007).

