Pedagogies of Discomfort

Confronting Supremacism in Community-Campus Partnerships

I'd like to start by saying I'm not a sociologist. I'm an educator. I recently asked a long-time teacher what being an educator entailed and she said "Well, I stomp out ignorance." That's quite a bold job description. But that's her story. It might make me uncomfortable. But that's the way I look at meaning and purpose, identity and values. I'm a storyteller.

I tell stories, I share stories, and I bring people together to talk about their stories. I watch for stories that bubble up between people. And I try to teach with these.

So in reference to my topic you're going to get a few stories.

a story…

It was June of 2011 and little did I know I was walking through a borderland. Walking down from the hill where Ezra Cornell decided to build his university I descended into "the community" – that all too homogenous term used to label the "other" we engaged academics try to partner with. Going to talk with the local community organizer that day, I crossed the creek dislocating HUD-housing Northside from my white middle-class neighborhood of Fall Creek. And there I sat – a heterosexual southern white male researcher in the "managed" home of a black lesbian civil servant.

This was the first time I made a journey toward "engaged" research. I was about to be questioned on what I do. Foolishly, I "knew" the answer:

"So tell me, what is it that you do."—begins the normal get to know you chitchat
"Well, I collect stories. I'm interested in collecting stories of people who organize their communities around issues of social justice."

"Why would someone in *my* position ever tell *you* how I organize communities of color?"
"Well, I think a lot of people are battling similar issues in the food system and the story of your successes and challenges could help inform others doing similar work. That's really valuable."

"I know my story is valuable – and you don't think I share it? I share it with people who need to know."

What's in my story?

In the coming months I looked into what that story had to offer me. A heap of questions. Questions of my identity, my intentions, and ultimately my ethics.

The larger story I'm going to tell today is about how a community of campus-based actors navigate complex questions of identity, intentions, and ethics in trying to do collaborative politics. How the story we're a part of is pedagogical one, and an uncomfortable one at that.

I work in a five site, five year, five million dollar action research initiative called Food Dignity. One of our central questions is if and how academics can assist to further the goals of the five food justice organizations that are leading this project. We've been working together for two and a half years now. This partnership has been and continues to be productively uncomfortable. What George Yancy would call an arena of "creative discontent."

As Gramsci said "the intellectual's error consists in believing that one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned (Gramsci, 1972:418)." This feeling and being impassioned is at the root of how we think. As John Dewey's noted thinking begins with a felt difficulty.

With what feelings do we approach difficulty? What kind of feelings are we talking about here?

Many community organizers in this work are quite adamant about approaching their difficulties with a sense of anger. Admittedly the use of anger in political work has been noted throughout history. Look to Aristotle or Audre Lorde—it's there

Speaking from my own experience, the experience of that June day, one that I think many campus academics in partnerships can and do relate to, I've felt anger but more tangible for me is a feeling of being lost, the anxiety that comes along with that, as well as a profound sense of shame in our - often failed - attempts to build a relationship in these borderlands. Anxiety, shame and "lost" aren't necessarily the type of feelings you can build political movements on. These are closer to what Sianne Ngai calls "ugly feelings" - feelings often associated with negativity and a state of suspended agency (Ngai, 2005:2). In the stories I hear and share among my fellow academics in this process I hear us expressing what Ngai calls:

"the inherently ambiguous affect of disorientation in general…This "confusion" is the affective sense of bewilderment rather than the epistemological stance of indeterminacy. Despite its marginality to the philosophical canon of emotions, isn't this feeling of confusion and what one is feeling an affective state in its own right? And in fact a rather familiar feeling that often heralds the basic affect of "interest" underwriting all acts of intellectual inquiry(Ngai, 2004:14)?"

There is something highly pedagogical or as Ngai seems to say inquire-able about being uncomfortable in a state of suspended agency; something we can learn from our ugly feelings that we all too often avoid(Boler, 1999).   In the various projects we've come to share these uncomfortable stories- so as to not get stuck in them, but to dwell with them, commune with them. We're not leaving these stories behind in some cathartic wake

Back to the borderlands

My thinking for the better part of the past two years has been on these stories spaces of discomfort both small and large.

My focus in this work is not on "the community" but rather on "us" academics.

There is a lot of self-work we academics must go through as we attempt to work in collaboration with various non campus actors. My work is concerned with holding the spaces and conversations for that self-work to occur. Keep in mind that much of my work in pedagogy is around informal, popular pedagogy rather than formalized and programmatic education. Much of the education I do is one-on-one and conversational rather than based in formalized activities. It's based in stories we tell, believe, and share with one another—and how we might come to tell different stories about the work we do.

Ben Okri says "In a fractured age, when cynicism is god, here is a possible heresy: we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories that are planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted—knowingly or unknowingly—in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives (Okri, 1997: p46)."

I'd like to cover three edges along which our stories elicit a pedagogy of discomfort.

These edges have become apparent in Food Dignity's work participants have recounted these edges in story and these stories have continued to bubble up throughout our work.

three vignettes

- Identity

- Intentions

- Ethics

I'd like to tell three vignettes:

These are very existential questions. Who are we? What should we be doing? How might we make sure our values are played out in reality?

**Identity:
An academic
with a hat**

I call this story—the academic with a hat. This is Linus Pauling—I have nothing against him but he does wear that hat really well.

Sitting around a planning table—I hear an academic say well let me just take my academic hat of for a second—or alternatively I've heard "let me put my community hat on for a second."

Many academics that work in publicly active research consider the word "academic" to be a pejorative. Indeed it is often lobbed as such by community partners and chiding friends.   As such many academics try to get shed of it. Over the past 2.5 years I've watched academics squirm when they are put in the academic camp. The academic with a hat is one tactic an individual may mobilize to try and get out of the bucket. The "I wear many hats truism."

While the intersectionality of identities is true and a useful asset to embody this donning or ditching of hats is a defensive posture. Oh I'm an academic but you know I'm not one of those academics.

The discourse matches fairly well with theories of white identity development. How do we as academics mobilize our privilege and alternatively try to conceal it when it does not serve useful purposes in our partnership activities. Attachment to our academic institutional identity—along with institutions of whiteness, or maleness—

must be acknowledged. For academics who consider themselves the fringe this is an uncomfortable idea.

But owning our identity as academics in this work is how we come to have conversations about what constitutes and how to nurture a more healthy academic identity in partnership.

The feeling that most comes to the fore in this questioning of identity is shame. Much like being called a racist or misogynist, being called an academic in non-academic cricles often arouses shame.

Shame is normally considered a bad feeling - as such we tend to avoid it and even tend to get uncomfortable when someone talks about it.   Shame is associated with a lot of inner dialogue in which we often get stuck. Humans have a practical method of shame avoidance - it's how cultures are maintained. We react to it by limiting our exposure to the elements that arouse shame in us - we don't like feeling uncomfortable so if we have the means to be comfortable we do so.

People in privilege, including academics, often have the means to shelter themselves from ugly feelings including shame; be this through avoidance, denial, posturing rhetoric, or anesthetics. But shame serves a purpose. It keeps us from unquestioned pride.

Michalinos Zembylas sees this shame/pride dynamic play out in how national histories are constructed(Zembylas, 2008). The avoidance of discomfort that comes from shame creates prideful metanarratives that create both culturally dominant and racialized realities. We can even slip into these realities as more engaged academics who take pride in being "other than" their institution—the "in but not of" defense.

Shame is not the same as guilt though mind you. Audre Lorde says don't give me your guilt I can't do anything creative with guilt. Guilt is about something you did, shame is about something you are—your positionality in a social context.

Werry and O'Gorman say that a healthy understanding of shame make it central to the pedagogical experience. Particularly importnant to the goals of the Food Dignity project, they claim shame "makes a lie of Cartesian logic, bringing the body powerfully and palpably into the classroom (Werry & O'Gorman, 2007:216)." In bringing our bodies into the quote unqoute classroom, shame has a role in "impelling moments of self-venturing and self-transformation (ibid)" with the intent of mending socially unacceptable bonds of relationality.

These pedagogical aspects of shame are of particular importance to a project of

building better relations between campus-based academics and the surrounding Ithaca community. For me, shame is a sense of a broken bridge – an unfulfilled responsibility that is ultimately about healing my wounds rather than outwardly reparative community-service based on guilt. "Shame, as feminist theorists have argued, flares up when interests, care, joy or a desired connection is inhibited or goes unreciprocated (ibid: 216)." The bodily response to shame and the inward reflection it requires to renew social bonds is a basis of cultural production. Shame can be embedded in demoralizing and oppressive meta-narratives of social control or when used to combat these narratives it can form a central feeling of transformative education pushing for equitable relationships in contexts of historical marginalization.

Our academic partners have highlighted the us and them in this project and while there is a forming "we." The dililneation of our institutional roles and privileges—the explicit nature of those roles—has provided a very uncomfortable but productive space for our partnership.

Intentions: a public with a problem
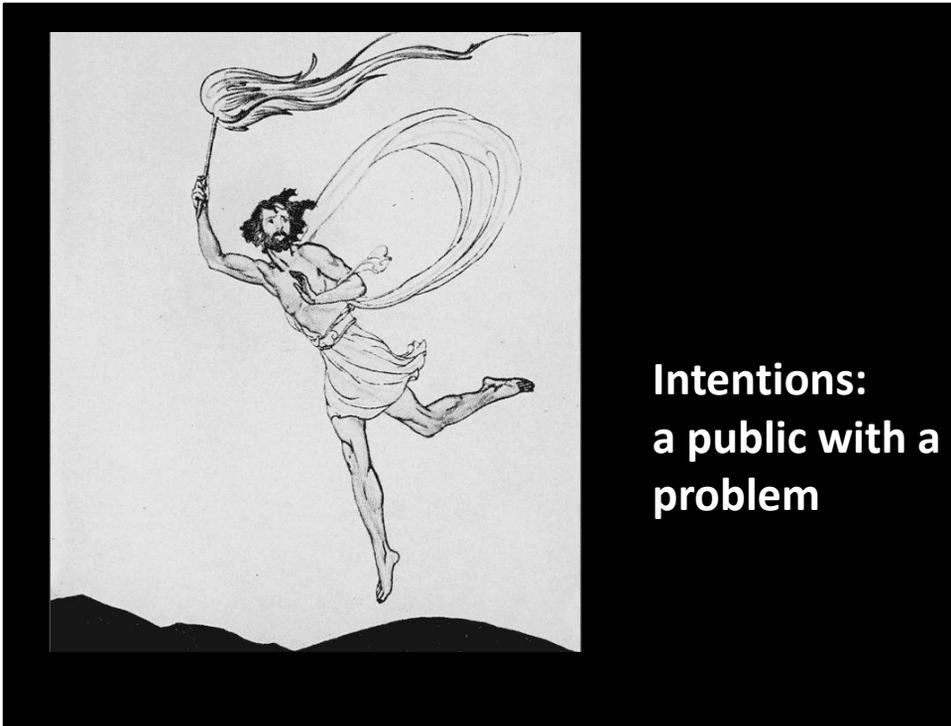
Story number two
What is our project all about

I call this story
: a public with a problem.

Ivan Illich of "to Hell with Good Intentions" fame was interested in the myths of society particularly those that influence education. One myth that he mentioned pervaded society to the point of lunacy was that of Prometheus.

Prometheus if you'll remember stole the sacred fire and the practical arts necessary for individual survival and gave them to humankind. We usually look on this myth as a heroic narrative. A hero from on high that saves humanity, us, from some anticipated doom.

It won't be a surprise to any of you that our academic institutions and practices are suffused with this myth. From our problem statements to our best practices, from our needs assesments to our research proposals we are taught to find a problem in the world out there that needs our promethean intervention. We set ourselves up as the world's problem solvers, what Naomi Scheman (2001) calls society's surrogate knowers (41).

Take notice of how long it takes a meeting of campus based and non-campus based actors to hone in on a potential "community problem" or "need." Without such problems out there academics find themselves rather lost. How am I to work with this community if they won't tell me what they want me to help them with?

As Myles Horton said

After failing time and time again to build relationships with local citizens of Appalachia Horton admitted and I quote "the solutions we have are for the problems the people don't have. And we're trying to solve their problems by saying they have the problems that we have the solutions for. That's academia.

At this Bill Moyers asked him, how do you figure out what people need—do you just ask them.

Myles responds no you don't ask them you just stay with them long enough so that you [and they] understand. It's in the meeting and dwelling that we come to understand.

A promethean relationship built on perceived need and academic solutions is not a meaningless relationship. There is meaning in charity, and help, it is not meaningless, but let's not consider it meaning-full either. It's a very transactional kind of relationships that often embeds itself in restrictive avenues of power and powerlessness. It's not life-affirming. It's not very humanistic.

In my search for something more than promethean interventionism I'm following Illich's advice and trying to learn something from the story of Prometheus' mythical brother Epimetheus. It's an ethic I don't have time to describe here but feel free to approach me after the talk.

Through it all in this project we've begun to get very clear that our work is not about "fixing" people. And that is a very uncomfortable ethic to swallow.

**Ethics:
a tree of
choices**
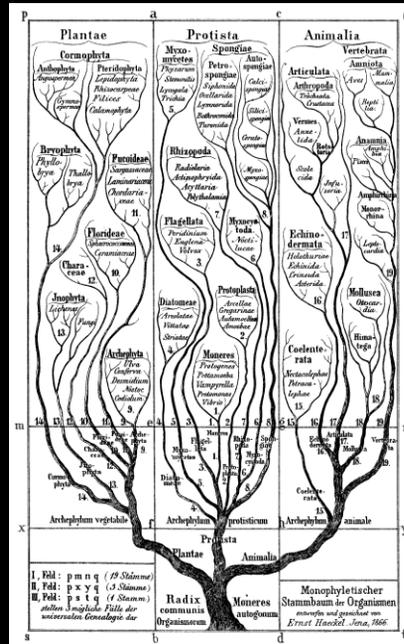
Which brings us to my last story on ethics

It's a story I like to think of as a tree of choices.

Ethics in my working definition is a how we realize our values in practice. There's much discussion of values floating around in this engaged work. Values of care, hope, resilience, equity, justice. It's how we put those values into practice, how those values inform our choices and to some extent dictate our actions, roles and responsibilities to one another—that's ethics. And as we know our rhetoric and reality in this work are often at odds with one another.

A friend of mine recounted to me that this work is much like a phylogenetic tree. He described the first choice we make as researchers as something along the lines of "who gets to ask the question?" Then later who gets to chose the methods, who gets to do the analysis, who gets to define success, also who gets to divvy up the resources among folks responding to these questions?

As we all know the Institutional Review Board doesn't help us answer these questions. It might even preclude us from asking them at times. This is a shame. But the repeated bashing of the IRB in academic journals and activist academic circles hasn't often led to alternative structures or practices within our labor that keep us accountable to one another, and accountable to ourselves.

Some people work in new structures for ethical reflection: I've been fortunate to know Mary Brydon-Miller who has been doing work in covenantal ethics and developed a few practices that can form the basis for ethical consideration above and beyond the guidelines of the IRB. I'd encourage you all to look into it. Structured Ethical Reflection. I have some notes on this I can share at the end of this panel.

But I work through sharing stories. And I've found the practice to be uplifting. It's a method of practicing ethics if you will that goes against the grain of our status quo way of working. The academic habit of individualism and critique doesn't assist publicly active academics in the difficult choices of a more democratic and decolonizing research. Choices that implicate the very roots and the furthest branches of our work.

Stories have been assisting us in navigating these choices. This is not a list of best practices. There is no list.

Asking a colleague for advice in this work she told me no. Then she told me a story.

About her parents and the roles they

"See, there's like this brain way of – it requires me to get in a different part of my brain. There's ways of connecting to something, like in the flow of a conversation or some kind of process that doesn't have words – for me. It can't have words because there's a whole different way of knowing, for lack of a better word. In order for me to answer [that question of advice] I would have already had to sort of – [hmmph] I feel my way through things.

…ADVICE! ADVICE! I can't do that, can't do that.

….I feel my way through things.

Our stories, much like the theater, are feeling factories. They make us uncomfortable as we learn to learn with one another. Stories we tell can help keep us accountable to one another. And that's the point of ethics

Ultimately this work is about doing right by one another. We'll get there through a kind of critical generosity, a kind of productive vulnerability that often goes unseen in and between our disciplines. Storytelling, Storylistening can help us rebuild that kind of community.

Thanks.

In the spirit of Thomas King, I'd like to thank you for listening to this story. "Take it. It's yours. Do with it what you will. Make it the topic of a discussion at [our] scholarly conference. Put it on the Web. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story.

You've heard it now (King, 2003: 60)"

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Here are the folks from whom I borrowed some thoughts.