

The Making of a Postcolonial Dissident Scholar

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The Czech playwright, essayist, poet, dissident, and last President of Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel (1990), wrote,

You do not become a 'dissident' just because you decide one day to take up this most unusual [path]. You are thrown into it by your personal sense of responsibility, combined with a complex set of external circumstances. You are cast out of the existing structures and placed in a position of conflict with them. It begins as an attempt to do your work well, and ends with being branded an enemy of society.

Dissident voices emerge from historical conditions of political crisis, social disruption, and economic betrayal. As social agents of revolutionary ideas, dissidents embrace a commitment to historical struggle as a life vocation. Those who emerge from the anguish of poverty and dispossession know only too well the need to be ever vigilant and conscious of how political power in society is exercised. Such scholars exist in direct opposition to myths of modernity that would have us believe that our world can only be genuinely known through dispassionate inquiries and transcendent postures of scientific neutrality, as defined by Western philosophical assumptions of knowledge.

Instead, dissident scholars refuse to be extricated from the flesh and, thus, immerse ourselves fully into the blood and guts of what it means to be alive, awake, and in love with the world. As such, political grace becomes an imperative of struggle. Grace, here, is not employed as a religious concept, but rather it is constitutive of an emotional and communal power that ruptures our alienation, in the wake of neoliberal devastation. Instead of the boredom, isolation, and banality of contemporary mainstream life, dissident scholars seek places of imagination, possibilities, creativity, and Eros from which to live, love and dream anew.

However, the journey can be arduous and contemptuous. Dissidents must be constantly self-vigilant and formidably prepared to contend with a variety of obnoxious contentions and veiled obstructions that, consciously or not, serve as effective roadblocks to the wider dissemination of radical ideas and revolutionary visions. This is to say, that unless one is born into or is in alliance with the ruling class, the journey to voice for dissident scholars is an extremely precarious one. Many come dangerously close to losing heart, mind, body, and soul—all serious losses that can effectively disable dissident passion, make uncertain our faith, shed doubt on our intentions, and thus, immobilize the transgressive power of dissenting voices—voices absolutely essential to democratic life.

In a climate of marginalization, systematic silencing, and brutal assaults to our personhood, relationships are not easy terrain for dissident scholars, given that these can often become tainted by the ripe stink of competition, jealousy, dismissal, ridicule, or mean-spirited

gossip. In a world of alienating competition and wholesale consumption, the dissident scholar that demands justice is easily marked as lunatic, renegade, or an enemy of the state.

To remain sane and not lose heart in such an atmosphere requires much more than just the willingness to do battle out in the field. It demands a willing to also wage battle within; to wrestle our personal demons to the ground, instead of projecting them on to the political arena. Yet, even then, the dissident is not absolved of being pathologized or maligned. Given the rocky terrain, political commitment to dissent can develop, in some, well-worn emotional muscles, so that love, courage, persistence, passion, and solidarity can sustain us upright, as we dust ourselves off each time we fall and must begin the journey anew.

Dissidence is not a Performance!

Celebrity culture has leached into every aspect of our culture, including politics [and the academy]...
Christopher Hedges (2010)

Political dissidents are not performers, rock stars, or celebrities. The very ego-mechanisms that drive such compulsions are in direct conflict with the political aims of dissent. For while celebrity performers, anchored in the profit motives of the entertainment industry, fancy themselves as great contributors to humanity, the feet of political dissidents are constantly held to the fire, with few resources to stave off public slander or institutional thrashing. As Hedges (2010) so rightly argues,

Celebrities have fame free of responsibility. The fame of celebrities... disguises those who possess true power: corporations and the oligarchic elite. Magical thinking is the currency not only of celebrity culture, but also of totalitarian culture. And as we sink into an economic and political morass, we are still controlled, manipulated, and distracted by the celluloid shadows on the dark wall of Plato's cave. The fantasy of celebrity culture is not designed simply to entertain. It is designed to keep us from fighting back (33).

In contrast, dissident scholars are anchored to revolutionary possibilities that demand both intellectual discipline and irrepressible courage to speak the unspeakable, to stand alone if necessary, and to accept the material and emotional consequences of tramping over hegemony's "holy" ground and scared cows. Unfortunately, in the deeply privatizing, bootstrapped, and consuming neoliberal culture of the day, even liberal university professors and public intellectuals seem more invested in what Warren Susman (cited in Hedges 2009) terms the "new culture of personality," than the responsibility to remain ever vigilant and in contestation with forces of oppression and injustice that threaten to dehumanize our bodies and our souls.

Hedges (2009), in *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*, distinguishes the difference between the nature of dissident scholars—who have nothing to gain from their political actions other than to remain true to the power of their convictions, and the nature of the elite performer class who easily moves from one glossy political fad to the other, devoid of political substance or a clear vision of class struggle or social transformation.

Hedges argues further, "The old production-oriented culture demanded "character." The new consumption-oriented culture demands "personality." The shift in values is a shift from a fixed morality to the artifice of presentation. The old cultural values of thrift and

moderation honored hard work, integrity, and courage. The consumption-oriented culture honors charm, fascination, and likeability. "The social role demanded of all in the new culture of personality [is] that of a performer"... (51). Nowhere is this truer than within the stifling context of academic life.

To reduce the actions and the role of dissident scholars to performance or to a personality gone amuck, conveniently deters and ignores the need for substantive and sustained engagements with injustice. As such, the hegemonic phenomenon of the culture industry functions to veil deeper political questions and ethical concerns that must be raised—question and concerns that expose the hypocrisy and contradictions at work in the very fabric of American institutions and US democracy.

Hence, true to Marxist wisdom, the ruling ideas of our society continue to be those of the ruling class, despite the democratizing rhetoric of the so-called new social networks. And theories to the contrary are simply wishful delusions or deliberate camouflage of what history has taught us, according to Frederick Douglass (1857).

If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation...want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightening. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.... Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will (197).

Dissidents and Power

The dissident is not seeking power...has no desire for office and does not gather votes...does not attempt to charm the public...offers nothing and promises nothing. [She] can offer, if anything, only [her] own skin-and [she] offers it solely because [she] has no other way of affirming the truth [she] stands for. [Her] actions simply articulate [her] dignity as a citizen, regardless of the cost.

Václav Havel (1990)

In postmodern renditions of a decade ago, it seemed that the location of power had suddenly flattened—power was everywhere and nowhere. The pretense that all metanarratives should be disposed seemed to signal a new epoch in democratizing theory, coinciding with the emergence of neoliberalism. However for some radicals, this philosophical whim seemed a dangerous proposition in a world where capitalism's internationalizing force had well-preserved the majority of wealth and power, overwhelmingly, in the hands of a few.

Hence, to speak of power outside of a larger revolutionary anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggle serve, inadvertently, only as diversionary intellectual trysts. Hence, issues of power remain ever at the heart of radical dissident voices. However, this power is not in pursuit of established power, but rather as a call for the reinvention of what Havel refers to as "genuine power."

Yet, it should be noted that it is precisely a lack of concern for established power and an uncompromising commitment to the transformation of social power that ultimately renders dissident scholars suspect and in need of silencing. In a world where self-interest and individualistic pursuit seem paramount, a dissident scholar can seem quite the odd bird, facilitating the possibility of workplace mobbing or institutional consensus for dismissal.

At least, this has been the case in my life. And despite all the consternations to the contrary of those who in the past have silenced my voice, as Havel argues, I have held no economic, cultural, or political power that would render my ideas or my presence of any real threat to any establishment. The only power I hold and have held is the power of my words, the substance of my political convictions, and the passion that resides within my soul. But, of course, for the dissident scholar these are our weapons, whether words are used against the tyranny of individuals, against the injustice of corporations, or against the racialized impunity of the state.

To say, however, that dissident scholars hold no power, does not mean that we are afflicted victims or powerless casualties of oppression, but rather that dissidents recognize, if we are to remain in integrity with our political convictions and respect the dignity of our humanity, then we must, first and foremost, acknowledge the futility of striving to enter into the domain of hegemonic power, which illegitimately resides in the hands of the wealthy and their faithful managers and performers—all who, wittingly or unwittingly, dictate through their callous pretensions and white-washed morality, who shall leisure and who shall toil; who shall live and who shall die.

Thus, a life of dissent requires us to expel the “success myths” of capital that pollute the ivy halls of academia and to reject the warped and distorted privileges of power, preserved and doled out to the obedient servants of the empire. And as such, dissident scholars reject the incarceration of our minds and bodies, by the neat and orderly colonizing rationale that conserves the hegemonic order of the university.

True to this commitment, radical dissidents rail against one of the most underhanded crimes against humanity—namely, sentencing the majority of the world’s population to a life of wretched poverty and dependence and then, blaming them collectively for their “moral ineptitude” or “cultural flaws.”

Perhaps I became a dissident because of my very intimate knowledge with what it means to be seen as deficient—racialized, gendered, and economically dispossessed at every stage of my life, from impoverished child, welfare mother, “paraprofessional,” and finally my entrance into the fully certified “professional” class. And along this journey, I was subjected to the degrading remarks of nurses, who cackled about the 16 year-old “Spanish” girl in labor; or waiting upon the mercy of a church basket to feed my children; or sitting in a welfare office dejected and shamed for my poverty; or hearing the veiled surprise of principals, each time one of my children tested “gifted;” or listening to the nursing instructor who wanted me investigated because she could not believe that I produced such a well-written final study; or receiving the news, after the fact, about anonymous student letters accusing me of “reversed racism” sent in opposition to my tenure; or listening to a liberal “diversity” colleague explain why she could not stand up in my defense when I was unjustly hazed by members of my department; or to witness a Dean summarily reduce my 30 years of scholarship to the realm of “opinion.”

To be constantly at the receiving end of racialized prejudice, class exploitation, gendered marginalization, and political disempowerment is wearing to every aspect of our lives. No doubt it is meant to push us back into our appropriate places in the veiled caste order of racialized, gendered, homophobic ideals of perfect bodies. And unfortunately very often these tactics are overwhelmingly effective in coercing acquiescence or withdrawal, should one fall prey to indifference, apathy, cynicism, or despair.

Dissidents, however, seem to be those who have had enough. Ya basta! has been the rallying cry of farmworkers, Zapatistas, and Chicana and Chicano revolutionaries, alike—dissident movements of people who could no longer remain complacent to the injustice or accept the prescribed domestication of the powerful and wealthy. Moreover, to say “enough is enough” prompts dissident scholars to speak with faith of revolutionary possibilities and to challenge with conviction myths of exceptionalism that effectively preserve all forms of inequalities and social exclusions.

Dismantling Exceptionalism

Our white sisters
Radical friends
Love to own pictures of us
Sitting at a factory machine
Wielding a machete
In our bright bandanas
Holding brown yellow black red children
Reading books from literacy campaigns
Holding machine guns bayonets bombs knives
Our white sisters
Radical friends
Should think
Again.

Our white sisters
Radical friends
Love to own pictures of us
Walking to the fields in hot sun
With straw hat on head if brown
Bandana if black
In bright embroidered shirts
Holding brown yellow black red children
Reading books from literacy campaigns
Smiling.
Our white sisters radical friends
should think again.

No one smiles
At the beginning a of a day spent
digging chunks of uranium
of cleaning up after
our white sisters
radical friends.

And when our white sisters
radical friend see us
in the flesh
not as a picture they own,
they are not quite as sure
If
they like us as much.
We're not as happy as we look
on
their
wall.

Jo Carrillo (1981)

Postcolonial scholars who come from impoverished racialized communities are often commodified in the world of neoliberal multiculturalism, as proof that anyone can succeed, if only they are sufficiently intelligent and willing to lift themselves up from the bootstraps. Liberals on the other hand seem to love the ideal of our presence, but are often ambivalent about our participation, particularly when our expressed concerns fall outside of the exceptional notions of their idealism. Dominant myths of exceptionalism not only shroud the debilitating impact of meritocratic ideals, but also support the notion that schooling and other aspects of American life are indeed democratic, despite the persistence of deafening inequalities.

But, what those of us who have been commodified as *spectacles of equality* know only too well is that the politics of exceptionalism objectifies and defines from the outside, both the exceptions and those who are deemed otherwise. Such tainted perspectives fail to contend with longstanding inequalities at work in the intellectual formation of poor and working class students, particularly those from racialized communities who enter bright and enthusiastic, but speaking a different language and, thus, from a different worldview.

Yet, with all of the hoopla of evidence-based research of No Child Left Behind and, now, Race to the Top, the rationality of national educational discourses have effectively narrowed and thus, readily perpetuate anti-democratic practices of high stakes testing and assessment in public schools. As a consequence, important political and scientific discourses alike are silenced, if they do not benefit the prevailing neoliberal rationality of meritocracy that fuels exceptionalism.

On a more personal level, my own dissent as a scholar can be linked to my battle against being objectified and commodified as an exception. By so doing, I have managed to remain more firmly anchored to an organic aesthetic and collective sensibility as a Puerto Rican, working class woman, who recognizes that it is by a sheer and inexplicable accident of history that I stand here now and speak these words. It is not some exceptionalism that empowers my political discourse or passionate commitment but rather, as my friend Barbara Richardson liked to say, *there but for the grace of God go I*. There are millions of poor and working class people around the world, fettered in prisons or enslaved by conditions not of their own making; citizens of the planet, formally educated or not, who ponder and dream of a world where justice and democracy prevail; not simply as a rhetorical veil of capital, but as an unexceptional living praxis of everyday life.

The Language of Dissidence

When I speak of knowledge...I am speaking of that dark and true depth which understanding serves, waits upon, and makes accessible through language to ourselves and others. It is this depth within each of us that nurtures vision.

Audre Lorde (1981)

There is no doubt that dissident scholars must speak consistently across many language forms to give voice to that knowledge that previously has been silenced. As for me, I know not when exactly I surrendered to a deep passion that beckoned me to speak of unspoken suffering, lest it remain stifled in fixed Bourgeois fantasies of “the other.” For some of us there is no escape from this task; there is no going back to the safety of anonymity—no matter how much one might fantasize of such at return, during moments of anguish. Once the unknown die is cast, the dissident scholar is compelled to speak or else have entire parts of

one's soul forever cut off by wicked panic and consternation—even if it results in the shedding of public tears.

For such tears, born of rage and shame, serve as a cleansing salve for fettered souls. They are another language of the repressed body, unleashed to counter the dispassionate sensibilities of those who can afford to distance themselves from the anguish of the dispossessed. Hence, the language of dissidence must be wide and far-reaching, for injustice cannot be permitted to escape from the radar of political vigilance. Moreover, developing a sense of comfort across the language forms of the privileged and not so privileged is essential to listening and learning with others, in any public or private space.

And none of this ever requires speaking over people's heads or disrespectfully "dummying down" political discourse, believing that this is the only way in which the young or those of modest means might find it intelligible. Instead, for me it has meant accepting responsibility for making my meaning clear even when using language that is more at home in the university classroom than on the streets of the barrio in which I grew up. Nevertheless, what I know from my personal experience is that language, just as political struggle, is communal. And thus, it is most powerfully understood and learned within the material conditions that inform it; and most powerfully cracks open privilege when used to speak of suffering or tangible possibilities of everyday life.

Dissidence in the Flesh

When you defend your ideas in public, you then have to make an effort to live accordingly.

Paulo Coelho

Mine is a dissidence of the flesh. Hence, I seek to speak publically only those words for which I am prepared to struggle for and to live by. And this seems a far lesser danger, at least for the moment, than that of many historical dissidents the world over, whose have suffered incarceration and death for their political convictions.

For example, just recently, Myanmar (or Burma's) military government finally released the dissident it considers an archrival—democracy leader and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been jailed or under house arrest for most of the last 21 years. Stories like hers make me wonder why it is that we as a nation, with far greater possibilities for dissent than most, still remain crippled in the face of oppression; unable to enact a historical breakthrough that can awakens us from our morbid slumber.

No doubt, there is always a physical and emotional price to be paid for one's unwillingness to be silenced or repressed, even in our so-called democratic nation. Ethel and Julius Rosenberg and Sacco and Vanzetti were U.S. dissidents who paid with their flesh. Many political prisoners, who remain in U.S. prisons today such as American Indian Movement activists Leonard Peltier, are a direct result of the activities of the FBI's counter-intelligence program, COINTELPRO, which operated from directed against U.S. dissidents. According to J. Soffiyah Elijah (2002),

Hundreds of members of the Puerto Rican Independence Movement, The Black Panther Party, The Young Lords, The Weather Underground, Student for a Democratic Society (SDS), The Republic of New Africa (RNA), The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Members of the American Indian Movement, (AIM), The Chicano Movement, The Revolutionary Action Movement

(RAM), peace activists, and everyone in between were targeted by COINTELPRO “for neutralization” (130-131).

Others who refuse to pretend that there is *no elephant in the room* can also suffer consequences less physically destructive, but yet severely scarring to the psyche. More often than not, workplace repression is deliberate and orchestrated; meant to shut down dissent and preserve the structures of inequality so prevalent to the bureaucratic norms of both private and public institutions.

In such contexts, one quickly discovers that the quality of labor or the quantity of credentials will seldom protect dissident scholars from repression—particularly those from working class and racialized communities who are already perceived as both suspect and second class. Hence, political dissidents live with the knowledge that they are never immune from the repressive forces of organizational paranoia or national hysteria, both which can blindside without a moment’s notice, should a threat to the established order, real or imagine, rear its ugly head.

Hence, one cannot be naïve, for inherent in the labor of dissident scholars is an oppositional stance against the repressive forces of capital and exclusionary policies of the state. Hence, dissident scholars are not to be trusted. This is not because we are untrustworthy, but rather because we can be trusted to disrupt racialized bourgeois etiquettes of civility, if need be, to push back attitudes or actions that are fundamentally destructive to democratic life—no matter where, or who, is in leadership.

The struggle against oppression for true dissidents is not an individual matter, but rather in concert with a larger political project that informs the transgressions and disruptions of dissent. It is precisely this collective and communal agenda of struggle that makes the ways of dissidents fully unintelligible to both their conservative and liberal peers. This is particularly so within academia, where an allegiance to the working class and anti-imperialist agenda is regarded as vulgar or passé; and where *activist scholarship* is frowned upon as lacking rigor and dangerously too steeped in practical concerns. Why should an intellectual with a secure position and good pay venture into the danger zones of such unstable terrain? Such are the attitudes that prevail among collegial circles when one not only writes about liberation, but also seeks to embody liberation as a living praxis. Within the university, dissident praxis is generally met with suspicion.

Within our communities, university dissidents can also be met with suspicion. However, one of the overarching axioms of being a dissident scholar is that struggle seems to choose the dissident, as much as the dissident chooses struggle. In the making of a dissident scholar, one reaches a point of no return; not because one feels compelled by comrades or forced by foes to do so, but because one comes to understand that our greatest political agency, as individuals and communities, resides not in our perfection of ideas or the correctness of our actions, but in our on-going commitment to struggle for our humanity and to act with uncompromising courage—particularly when we must commit to facing our own human follies.

Hence, dissident scholars must struggle to abide in the love and solidarity of community, even during difficult moments. For dissident scholars, probably more than most people, actually need committed comrades, who with their clarity and strength both support and challenge us to rethink, to re-feel, and to reinvent our praxis, in light of the ever-partial nature of knowledge and the ever-changing conditions of history.

Dissidents as Decolonizing Subjects of History

Decolonization involves profound transformation of self, community, and governance structures. It can only be engaged through active withdrawal of consent and resistance to structures of psychic and social domination.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003)

Postcolonial dissident scholars have little choice than to remain anchored as decolonizing subjects of history. Thus, any moment of life is but a decolonizing rendering of our personal and collective histories. In seeing oneself, others, and the world as ever historical, the dissident scholar can be freed both from the fascistic compulsion to perfection tied to colonized existence and the underlying deception that anything produced at any given moment is somehow the *ultimate end all*. The decolonizing process is for us a way of life, given the encrusted layers of racialized oppression.

Paulo Freire understood well the importance of holding this view of ourselves in history, in that such a view actually works to support a deeper faith in others and in the possibility of actual community transformation. If the world in which we live is a collective rendering of both our affective and material conditions, then the possibility of creating a decolonized world is also found in our collective hands. To participate in such an endeavor, however, demands we seek an integral quality in our work and our lives—one that is attained by our willingness to be touched by the preciousness of life, not as sappy sentimentalism, but as political and cultural necessity. It is from such an ecologically motivated politics that we can labor to reconstruct and reenact relations of power that confirm the wide-ranging complexity and affirm the vital diversity of our human existence.

In the life of a dissident scholar, one must wage a multitude of battles with those who would repress our right to speak and to enact an emancipatory vision of education—a vision that, as Eagleton (2003) so rightly argues, neither abandons the romantic soulfulness of our humanity nor the realistic dimensions of our battered world. For, it is in the dialectical tension of these two essential dimensions of our existence, that dissident scholars find fertile ground for imagination, passion, creativity, friendship, solidarity and revolutionary love.

Unfortunately, dissidents who hold steady such a dialectical vision are often branded rebels, with the least provocation. To judge a dissident scholar as somehow defiant for defiance sake is far simpler than to critically grapple with the deeper ethical questions being raised. Moreover, as Hedges (2010) contends in *Calling all Rebels*,

The power structure and its liberal apologists dismiss the rebel as impractical and see the rebel's outside stance as counterproductive. They condemn the rebel for expressing anger at injustice. [They] call for calm and patience. They use the hypocritical language of spirituality, compromise, generosity, and compassion to argue that the only alternative is to accept and work with the systems of power. The rebel, however, is beholden to a moral commitment that makes it impossible to stand with the power elite. The rebel refuses to be bought off...aware that this virtue is not rewarded.

Ultimately, each of us must live and die with the decisions we've made. For dissident scholars, to live with hope and passion, demands our commitment to a larger vision—one that extends beyond vulgar individualism, competition, and careerist fantasies. Ours is a life consciously and deliberately committed to the struggle against the pretences of democracy and

“postcoloniality,” as we continue to fight for our own lives and the lives of all those who have been trampled by domination and exploitation.

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