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Scholar Activism: When Our Bodies Stand by Our Ideas

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Abstract

Should it feel good to get an award for scholar activism? As well-intentioned the recognition of my activism is, it misses the point of what activism is by singling out one person, especially a scholar. The danger with claiming scholar activism as heroic is twofold. First, it makes activists exceptional, implying that society may rely on exceptional individuals instead of valuing the collective work. Second, it glorifies the activism of scholars, as if it were more valuable than that of others while ignoring the hierarchies that empower and protect academia. Instead, we must normalize scholar activism, sharing the load and using our bodies as shields. We'll join the work of activism in constellation and value the power of emotions, embodying our ideas as we grow into activist scholars.

Keywords: embodied politics; scholar activism

Should it feel good to get an award for scholar activism? I wondered as I walked on stage. It felt quite a compliment to receive it, an unexpected one given where it came from, but it also felt unfair. I was no better than the many other women who had struggled with me over the years yet were not there; the other Manuelas, the Carmens, Ruths, and Juanas whose Indigenous bodies sustained so much more than mine but whose names were known to no one. Why me? I had done a fraction of their resistance, benefiting from a positionality of power that facilitated outcomes. To be singled out pointed at the problems of seeing scholar activism as heroic, leaving me wondering how to normalize it.

I let a long “waaaaawwww” at the mic, expressing awe for receiving a prestigious award as outstanding scholar activist from the International Studies Association, a field that often fails to engage with public life.¹ After two decades of living and learning with my Kichwa kin in the Ecuadorian Andes, of creating abundant journalism and diverse scholarship, of going to jail and running presidential campaigns, academia gathered to celebrate my contributions and unusual lifepath. Who would have thought that one day I'd be giving a speech in the footsteps of icons like Angela Davis and David Graeber in San Francisco? I sure didn't.

¹ For the Outstanding Activist Award, see <https://www.isanet.org/Programs/Awards/IPE-Outstanding-Activist-Scholar>.

Scholar activism ain't easy. The large Brazilian smile on my face hides the toll of my lifepath, beaming in resistance. Over the last decade, I was beaten, detained, and expelled from the country I called home. I was forcibly separated from my partner and community during years of exile, losing my sense of belonging and at times my voice. I learned the fear of being constantly followed, not knowing if they'd rape me or kill a family member to deter me. I was fired in retaliation for saying publicly what people said about elected officials behind closed doors. All these threats and harassment occurred despite being a white foreign scholar in a predominantly Indigenous country of the Global South. Things would have been much more difficult had I not been protected by white privilege and a Brazilian passport. I was conscious of the intersectionality of privileges that protected me when I prioritized court hearings over theoretical writing, when I secured collective action at the cost of career opportunities, money, and even health. Still, activist life had ground many of my dreams to dust, swallowing any remaining insouciance. Even love, which once held it all together, seemed to have turned into another damaged good.

Activism is anything but glorious. It wears you down and breaks you physically and financially. You own a bullet proof vest instead of real estate; you text loved ones on encrypted apps with disappearing messages. A film documenting activist fragments of my life did not grasp the texture of fear – a dark side hard to celebrate.² Activism is invisible, endless work that damages your body and affective relations. It steals the childhood from our children, who live in our absence and in fear of losing us. It makes us long for academic comfort, whether it is family vacations, tenured positions, or simply the pleasure of an office with books.

I didn't see it coming, in part because the costs are not foreseeable, and in part because I had fallen into it. It had never been a rational decision, and for most people, it is not an option either. It is not something to regret; it just is. As a white scholar, I could have looked the other way, treating racialized oppression as a research topic, engaging with it as academic work that one leaves behind in a drawer when returning home. But for most people, it is daily life, because those who are racialized cannot put a white skin on weekends to take a break from resisting oppression. I learned that when I married Yaku, an Indigenous lawyer and water-defender who was Indigenous 24/7, who could not leave that skin in the closet for the weekend nor leave the territory for extended summer vacations in the Alps, like I could. There was no break from the mining corporation encroaching on territory, and there was always a new lawsuit to criminalize him or other members of the community who would need his legal assistance not to rot in an Ecuadorian jail. It was more than daily work, it was life, and when I married him, I became a member of the collective body. My individual body became part of a collective body, as we all are, whether we realize it or not, whether we are labeled white, Indigenous, or Black, and whether we take our responsibilities or not. I learned through experience – the hard and violent way and the sweet way too. It chipped privilege away, a process that can only be emancipatory as one learns what the world is made of. It was transformative in irreversible ways, because once I knew, I could not unknow.

There are millions of people on this lifepath, exhausted and under threat, living on barely no income. As I write, many are being murdered for simply trying to keep their communities alive. Activism is dangerous where I come from: close to 80% of the rights defenders assassinated in the world are from Latin America and a third of them are

² *La Manuela*, directed by Clara Linhart 2017. See <https://www.jangada.org/movie/la-manuela>.

Indigenous.³ Not everyone does activism the same way; not all bodies are equally vulnerable to dispossession; not all bodies stand on the frontlines. Although Indigenous people are only 5% of the world population, they hold on their territories 80% of the remaining biodiversity in the world and are almost a third of nature defenders assassinated globally.⁴ Women carry the hardest load yet are the most invisible ones.⁵ Women sustain Indigenous people who sustain the commons which sustain life on the planet, yet their daily activism is largely taken for granted. When their names appear, it is rarely for awards and more often on the listings of defenders killed such as the one Global Witness publishes annually.⁶

Although scholarly awards are often interwoven with politics, their proliferation speaks to the neoliberalization of an academia that tends to see achievements in individualistic terms. As well-intentioned the recognition of my scholar activism is, it misses the point of what activism is by singling out one person – especially a scholar. The danger with claiming scholar activism as heroic is twofold. First, it makes activists exceptional, which implies that society may rely on exceptional individuals to do the heroic work as we collectively fail to assume our responsibilities. Second, it glorifies the activism of scholars, implying that it is more valuable than that of others and overlooking the structures of authority that empower and protect them. Instead, we must normalize scholar activism, expect it, both to share the load with other activists and to live up to our responsibilities.

If anything, my award speaks to the lack of scholar activism. We know, at least in part, why few do it: costs are high, and recognition is low. Scholars are censored, punished, even killed for their ideas. The increase in scholars at risk and in exile worldwide is evidence that we pay a price to think. It also confirms that taking stands matter. Hundreds of Turkish scholars who signed the Peace Petition demanding a peaceful resolution to the massacre of Kurdish civilians in 2016 were charged with crimes of terrorism.⁷ From Brazil to Sudan, scholars often have no option but to engage in public life. The United Nations speak of “scholasticide” to refer to the attacks on scholars and the widespread destruction of educational infrastructure including the Central Archives in Gaza.⁸ But even less risky forms of activism in safer contexts of the liberal world imply additional work that goes unaccounted for in academic careers. Some have begun the transformative institutional work in our universities, hiring foreign scholars at risk and valuing certain forms of activism. I learned firsthand that activism takes time yet does not count for tenure. After being detained, I was part of a collective effort to shut down an illegal detention center that freed over 100 people in Ecuador.⁹ But that doesn’t count in publication rankings or for tenure. Nor does the international legal precedent my partner and I established at the United Nations after eight years of invisible legal work to formally recognize Indigenous ancestral marriage into law.¹⁰ For it to count, academia would need to change the rules of engagement and, indirectly, what it is all about.

³ FrontLine Defenders Global Analysis 2023–24. Accessed September 8, 2024. <https://www.frontlinedefender.org/en/resource-publication/global-analysis-202324>.

⁴ See Corntassel and Bryce 2012; Global Witness 2023.

⁵ Picq 2018.

⁶ Global Witness 2023.

⁷ Butler and Ertür 2017.

⁸ United Nations 2024.

⁹ Arcentales 2022; Salazar 2017.

¹⁰ Decision CERD/C/106/D/61/2017; see UN 2022.

Scholars have power, more than most people in society, and power entails responsibilities. We have the responsibility to inform, analyze, and speak truth to power. Of course, some scholars have more privilege than others, and our various positionalities shape our worldviews, expanding or limiting our analytical skills and sense of responsibility. Yet despite our different perceptions and sensibilities, are we to watch from university offices as the world's commons collapse under mass extinction, unprecedented levels of refugees, and the consolidation of authoritarian politics? What is our role in mobilizing political action to resist oppression and dispossession, in restoring the human dignity of those politically excluded?

Scientific practice nurtures the fiction of distancing knowledge from the world. Expectations of neutrality, rather than engagement, still permeate most fields, despite endless feminist warnings on situated knowledge and the impossibility of a disembodied viewpoint from nowhere.¹¹ This myth created an artificial division between thinkers and practitioners, a fragmentation that contributed to the abyss we now stand on. Can we produce theoretical knowledge without embodying it? Scholars cannot hide in offices telling others what to do; it is not only unethical, but it also leads to erroneous findings. Those who do intellectual work cannot expect others to keep on doing their share of physical, emotional, and collective labor. We need to do our share for the commons and get our hands dirty in the messy reality of public life.

How? Every context calls for different responses. Here are some thoughts from my own experience.

First, we can share the load to alleviate the communities who carry most of the burden. Activism involves endless, unpaid work, and it tends to be the same people sustaining it over time. We owe support to those at the frontlines, not only because the ones being crushed are busy trying to survive, but also because what is crushing some communities is what empowers others. Scholars are beneficiaries of power structures that create hierarchies of who are legitimate producers of knowledge. Scholars have the power – and responsibility – to stand by them. This means to support their claims, share resources, value their knowledge, and dedicate power and time to activities not valued by academia that will grant no income, publication, or promotion. Scholar activism can take many forms, from writing opinion pieces that amplify unheard claims to joining street protests or contributing expert reports to support legal struggles – any strategy that helps share the load.

For that to happen, we must normalize activism and redefine it as a scholarly responsibility rather than a heroic act. Perhaps this requires reframing the rules of the game, since individual choices are framed by institutional structures that assign high value to peer-reviewed publications and low or no value to engaged scholarship. How does one allocate time for research with societal impacts if we are discouraged to do so? Rules must encourage scholars to engage with the world, for instance, counting *amicus curae* briefs as applied scholarship. If institutional frameworks do not value action (even punish it), it restrains scholar activism through bureaucratic norms and professional expectations. That is not to advocate for further measuring of the social impact of our research to assess academic merit, nor make auditing systems ever heavier in ways that favor corporate productivity rather than the autonomy of universities enabling the use of critical reason. The very idea of metrics may not have a space in activism. Rather, it is to invite a major rethinking of what

¹¹ See the work of scholars such as Donna Haraway 1988 and Patricia Hill Collins 1990.

counts as knowledge-making: how it is practiced, spoken, and embodied, where, and by whom. Redefining metrics is ultimately about de-economizing our ways of interpreting the world to enable reflexivity and revaluing public humanities.

Second, we can use our body as a shield. We saw that happen when faculty across university campuses shielded students with their bodies from police repression during protests about divestment from the war in Gaza. A scholarly body holds authority and as such can be used as a shield to protect other bodies more vulnerable to repression. When I stand in Ecuadorian courts alongside Kichwa communities, both judges and lawyers take note. My body in the courtroom changes the balance of power, giving Indigenous communities more authority and making their claims more legitimate, or at least backed by scientific authority. It is much more than an individual stand when a scholar sides with the oppressed in court, because one represents the collective body of scientific knowledge production that takes a stand through one's body. It is a real power struggle.

A body is a territory, with languages and national borders, inscribed in systems of class and cast and global hegemonies. White bodies are useful in racist structures; scholarly bodies are useful in court and in street protests. We can use our bodies as shields, activating the territories they encompass, their authority and privilege. That is what I did in August 2015 during a national protest against the indefinite re-election of Ecuador's president. Yaku, my partner, was then coordinating Ecuador's Confederation of Kichwa People, and when the police grabbed him, I instinctively jumped on him using my body to protect him from the beatings. I used my positionality as a white, female, academic foreigner to shield him. It did not stop the beatings, which I received with him, but it generated a scandal. There is a difference when the police beat up a white academic body or a racialized, colonized body. His beating was a non-event, whereas mine generated immediate uproar, reaching national TV and putting the government in the international spotlight. In racist, classist societies, it is acceptable for the police to beat Indian bodies into obedience but not to beat a white scholar, holder of authority who stand above the police in the social stratification of the state. I activated the many intersections of my body-territory in a specific sociopolitical context, also using my Brazilian nationality tied to a hegemonic economy to benefit from a consul with abundant bargaining power to negotiate my physical integrity. We never shield alone; shields are composed of our collective relations.

Which leads to a third point: our constellations. Our individual journeys are collective ones; we create knowledge together and we sustain the web of life in relation. As the Kichwa say, *soy porque somos* (I am because we are). What a scholar can do alone expands exponentially in constellation. After I was beaten for shielding my partner in 2015, Ecuador's government revoked my visa then detained me for being undocumented.¹² I was a privileged detainee, being a white scholar benefiting from the presence of the Brazilian consulate who negotiated my physical safety and ensured I kept a cellphone at all times. From jail, I gave interviews to international media outlets, articulated support, and reported on jail conditions. Within days, an impressive team of lawyers, scholars, students, journalists, activists, family, and friends joined forces to free me. Their mobilization generated momentum, with articulated efforts that ended up freeing not only me but over 100 more detained foreigners. In the detention center, inmates managed to pass me a paper with their names, denouncing abuse, lack of medical care, and absence of legal support. I managed to pass it to my lawyers,

¹² For more about the visa revocation, see <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/seguridad/manuelapicq-cancilleria-detencion-visa-ecuador.html>.

since I was the only one receiving judicial help, who passed it on to journalists, who published it, triggering a cascade of mobilization for migrant rights beyond my case. Lawyers and journalists determined that the detention center was illegal: not only its creation had never been legally approved, but it detained people for being undocumented despite the constitution establishing the right to universal citizenship. It was an illegal jail that detained racialized people in unconstitutional ways.¹³ They mobilized and shut it down together. It was not one person but a constellation of stars who made it happen; a constellation of inmates, lawyers, and journalists, a constellation that was activated by the white body of a scholar but mobilized far beyond her. It's never one person. There is no hero. There are collective processes that change structures.

Intergenerational constellations are powerful. The Wanganui Māori people know; they fought for the Wanganui River for nearly 160 years until the government of New Zealand recognized its legal personhood.¹⁴ The Kichwa political leader Dolores Cacuango is known for saying it in a poetic way: *somos como paja de páramo, que se la arranca y vuelve a crecer, y de paja de páramo sembraremos al mundo* (we are like paramo straw, which is plucked and grows back, and we will sow the world with paramo straw).¹⁵ I learned intergenerational constellations through exhaustion. After being expelled from Ecuador, I spent years defending myself in the bureaucratic labyrinths of international organizations, eventually losing faith in the endless flow of paperwork that seemed to go nowhere. A former student of mine working at the UN suggested I take my case to the OHCHR's periodic examination of Ecuador, but I had given up. She insisted, offering to send one of her own students with my notes to represent me. The student of my student went to the periodic examination supported by fellow lawyers who had worked on closing the jail; together, they did it. The UN's periodic report explicitly recommended the government of Ecuador to let me back into Ecuador and to recognize my ancestral marriage. They did it without me, and they continued the work I had initiated, picking it up to take it further.

Constellations work through emotions, my fourth point. I could not have activated such powerful constellations without emotions. Emotions tend to be taboo, if not openly forbidden in political science, my field of study. Yet emotions are key to trigger political action; they are the dark matter that holds our relations, leads us into action, and sustains our engagement in the long run. Emotions have long been central in my scholar activism. It started with romantic love, when I jumped over the man I loved to shield him from police beatings. During the years of exile, our love became a site of resistance, fueling our determination to claim the legal recognition of our Indigenous ancestral marriage, which eventually gave me a family visa and achieved an international legal precedent with global implications for the self-determination of Indigenous families. Along the journey, friends mobilized their scholarly associations and academic deans, created a massive petition, and secured fellowships to provide me with income when I lost everything. Emotions turn into action, whether it is rage or compassion, fear, desire, or trust. Emotions are extraordinary tools for scholar activism.

Last but not least, scholar activism is the best learning space, the most honest critique, the trial that doesn't lie. If we don't engage in scholar activism for sharing the load, for shielding others, or building constellations or out of pure emotion... then we should at least do it out of selfish curiosity. We learn from standing for our ideas; we learn through the praxis, from

¹³ Arroyo 2021.

¹⁴ Salmond, Brierley, and Hikuroa 2019.

¹⁵ Rodas 2007.

standing in the world.¹⁶ The body is the first to learn, then our minds work on finding the words to express what the body already knows, to articulate it rationally into concepts and frameworks we call science. When our bodies stand by our ideas, we write the world with our bodies. We learn through our bodies when we step into the world, and in the process, we write the world with our bodies. It is one of those spaces of publication that is intangible to metrics and rankings, yet that is unforgettable to the bodies involved. The myth of a science disengaged from the world brushes aside our bodies and our imagination, the things we ultimately rely on as the first places of knowledge-making.

To stand by one's ideas is not a rational decision, nor can one foresee the risks. Scholars turn activists because inaction is not an option, because silence is complicity, because there is no such thing as neutrality, and because there is no such thing as disengaged knowledge. We do it for ourselves, not for others, because the risk of remaining a bystander is greater than that of taking a stand, and because inaction risks destroying one's self-worth. We grow into scholar activists when we assume our responsibility toward each other. We grow up into it because, as Sonia puts it in a haiku, as yet there is no other place to go.¹⁷

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