

# “Bringing Our Small, Imperfect Stones to the Pile”: The Everyday Work of Building a More Just World

Humanity & Society  
2023, Vol. 47(2) 193–209  
© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/01605976231158397

[journals.sagepub.com/home/has](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/has)



**Brittany Pearl Battle<sup>1</sup>, Tamara K Nopper<sup>2</sup>, and  
Antonia Randolph<sup>3</sup>**

## Abstract

In this conversation between Brittany Pearl Battle and Tamara K. Nopper (facilitated by Antonia Randolph), two sociologists who have been involved in a variety of social justice struggles (e.g. prison abolition, worker’s rights, Asian American rights), describe the everyday practices that make up struggles for social justice. They identify a spectrum of practices that individuals can do to bring about a more just world, while arguing that all practices towards justice do not constitute organizing or activism. Moreover, they describe the salience of their status as workers and women of color as structuring the ways they have pursued social change at different points in their lives. In so doing, they identify academia as a workplace rather than being an academic as a status as the salient force that shapes how they work to build a more just world. Ultimately, the article questions the usefulness of the designation scholar-activist, opting to recognize the unique role of activists in social change while affirming that we all bring what we can to struggles for justice.

## Keywords

activism, intersectionality, academic labor

---

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology, Wake Forest University, Winston Salem, NC, USA

<sup>2</sup>Department of Sociology, Rhode Island College, Providence, RI, USA

<sup>3</sup>Department of American Studies, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Antonia Randolph, Department of American Studies, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Greenlaw Hall 210, Cb 3520, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3100, USA.

Email: [antonia.randolph@unc.edu](mailto:antonia.randolph@unc.edu)

(This article, which has been edited for length and clarity, is a transcript of a virtual conversation that happened on 7-19-22).

**Brittany:** Hey, y'all. I am currently just finishing my third year at Wake Forest as an Assistant Professor of Sociology and Affiliate Faculty in the African American Studies program. I am now officially on leave all next year, on research leave. So excited about that! I'm also the co-founder of Triad Abolition Project, which is a grassroots org in Winston-Salem, North Carolina working on abolitionist projects locally and I'll talk more specifically about what we do. My research looks at carceral logics, in courts and family policy, social policies. My book project that I'm finishing up now is on the child support system and how the system works as a surveillance of the family, and what the implications of that are. And then I've also done work in the eviction court system. I'm currently working on a project that looks at the ways that the state surveils people who are on some form of community confinement: probation and parole and electronic monitoring for criminal legal system defendants. And then alternatives to detention programs for asylum seekers in the immigration system. So that's broadly what my work looks at.

**Tamara:** Hi. I am an Associate Professor at Rhode Island College in the Sociology department. My research looks at alternative data and credit scoring as it relates to the racial wealth gap. That's connected to my interest in technology and surveillance. I'm very interested in how issues like punishment and money intersect. And then I also do a lot of public education or political education work around the criminal punishment system. I'm starting a new project thinking about things like wellness and work. So I'm thinking about issues around surveillance and wellness and labor practices.

**Antonia:** Thank you both for laying out your intellectual projects. I'm Antonia Randolph and I am an Assistant Professor of American Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. But I'm trained as a sociologist and I study gender and sexuality in pop culture, particularly Black masculinity and hip-hop. I'm so thankful to have both of you here to think through ideas about scholarship and activism, humanistic sociology, and social justice.

The first thing I want to talk to you about is how did you each get involved in activism? How did you get involved in movement work?

**Tamara** Well, for me, I would sort out the difference between being an activist and being involved in movement work. I don't think of those as one and the same. This is my own approach. I think people can be an activist, but it can be anything from a specific campaign or a specific kind of outcome or can be just raising awareness. But it's not always connected to movement work. I see being connected to movement work as something very different, because it usually involves creating relationships and being part of thinking about how your work connects to a broader momentum and relationship-building and infrastructure-building towards something, and being part of specific organizations and campaigns and relationships. I have been part of all these different types of things at different points.

When I was in undergrad, it was very basic stuff, like getting involved in protests on campus, or writing the editor about racism or being part of the African American

Student Union. And I started my own Asian American student group. But when I got involved in stuff around Mumia Abu-Jamal in undergrad, that was very politicizing for me. And this is before you could really get plugged in through the Internet but I remember reading about Ramona Africa online, and inviting her to speak at my college and she flew out and came and spoke. I was involved in different activist campaigns and different protest around policing.

But it was when I moved to Philadelphia to get my PhD at Temple University, I got involved in an Asian American community organization in Chinatown, and I sought them out. I had read about them before I moved to Philly, and they were very anti-police brutality, and they had organized campaigns. I just kept going to the organization saying, "Can I get involved?" Finally, I got hired as an administrative assistant. But it was a small organization where you basically do anything and everything in different roles. I was also on an organizing committee for the youth program, In general working at this community organization is how I got involved in more of the movement building work in the ecosystem of citywide campaigns and political campaigns. But I will say now I'm not really an activist. I'm more of an activist who raises consciousness, but I'm not connected to movements in the same way, and I just want to own that instead of trying to act like I am.

**Antonia:** That's a very important distinction, Tamara, and I appreciate it. Brittany, does any of that resonate with you?

**Brittany:** I appreciate that distinction, too. Between being connected to movement spaces, and then just figuring and doing activism in different ways, and I think even teasing out some of the distinctions between activists and organizers can be helpful, too. Because I think so many of us get this label of scholar-activists. And I think we don't have enough conversations about what that really entails in academia, what folks are actually doing to get that label. So, I definitely appreciate that conversation.

I think I have always been, since childhood, raising havoc in some ways. Trying to draw attention to things that we collectively thought were problematic. I led a walk out in eighth grade because this teacher was just racist and sexist. And he refused to retire. And I think I had space to do stuff like that because my parents were always super supportive. Then in undergrad doing different organizing work on campus related to racism and anti-blackness. There is one... you probably remember this, Antonia—do you remember the sit-in that we did in the President's office at University of Delaware? That would have been in 2008.

**Antonia:** I kind of remember that. Sidebar: I know Brittany because I was a professor at University of Delaware when she was as an undergrad.

**Brittany:** So you know that walk-out we organized, I still have the student newspaper from then and the sit-in we organized about the noose on campus. And the President's office didn't respond. So, we all met in Trabant, which was our dining hall area, and about 40 or 50 of us walked down, wearing all black, and sat in the President's office.

In grad school I did labor union stuff around grad student employment. And then once I moved to Winston-Salem and really got plugged into this organizing community.

And it was baptism by fire, as they say. I was the first person arrested in the summer of 2020 in Winston-Salem during the protest here. And it was as soon as we started protesting around the case of John Neville, who was a Black man murdered by sheriff's deputies in the detention center. And it was really through this that my organization got founded, our organization got founded. And we started the 49-day occupation here until they changed the policies. So, right now I'm finding myself in a period, as Tamara pointed out, that's connected to movement spaces because of the work that I'm doing with my org. And I think I'll be in and out of those periods of life because I think we all have to take breaks, too. I think that's something super important about doing this work.

**Antonia:** You both have had different moments of being more on-the-streets activists and less so. Why does academia still call you? Can you imagine a world where the urgency of things that need to be changed are so great that you say goodbye to this space? Have you thought of leaving academia?

**Brittany:** For me, one of the biggest draws to stay in academia is because of the resources that it provides to do movement work. I can get grant funding to do political education in the community, for instance, but also resources as far as my time. You know, I would not have been able to occupy for 49 days if I wasn't off for the summer from my job. And so that stuff definitely is a draw about academia. And then the students, because I think just being able to teach a seminar on abolition, and the number of students who by the end of that are like, "Wow! Prior to this I was thinking abolition was crazy." And then, by the end of the class, they're, you know, quoting Mariame Kaba, which is just wonderful, right? So, definitely, the students and the resources.

Then, being able to do research that has an impact for real people, that I'm not just building a career separately, but that being able to engage in ways that I can say to a person, "Okay, this is the way that the research I've done can help you navigate this issue in the child support system," for instance. Being in that system, and then being able to work with re-entry groups, for instance, reentry programs about how to navigate their child support issues.

And then everything else is what makes me want to leave, all the other things. You know universities are capitalist, they're imperialists, they're racist. And none of us are exempt from having those types of experiences in academia. I'm in the rural South, in western North Carolina, or central North Carolina. But what I have tried to do throughout my life is, wherever I am, take what I can that's generative for the work that I'm trying to do, and try to put the other stuff to the side as much as possible. Some days are harder to do that than others, but that's what I'm trying to do.

**Antonia:** Yeah. And then what about you, Tamara?

**Tamara:** This is something I've been kind of interested in: academic faculty as workers. How we kind of think about ourselves as workers. And some of this has to do with my own journey in academia, being an adjunct for so long, and then finally landing a tenure track job. I was an adjunct for many years, and just teaching a ton of classes, as many classes as I could get. And then ending up at a college that's kind of broke. I literally write in fellowship applications, "My college was broke before the pandemic." I just say that because I ended up at a college where within a few years of me starting,

we were about to go on strike because we were one of the lowest paid schools among a bunch of so-called “comparable” schools.

I’ve spent a lot of time in the last so many years just thinking about academic labor politics, but also the conversation around academic labor politics. I was also the union rep for my department for several years with our faculty union.

The reason I bring this up is that regarding your question, why does academia still call you, the first thing I would say is it’s a job. We need employment and we need an income in this society. What often happens is there’s this idea that we’re supposed to be ashamed to say, well, the first reason I’m working in academia is because I want to earn an income. Not to say that we can’t look for deeper meaning in our work. I’ll just say this because it’s a job, and it was better than going to a 9 to 5. I didn’t really understand what grad school was, I didn’t really know what a PhD was. And then I like doing research. I like reading, and I’ve learned that I like teaching.

One of the things I appreciate about what you said, Brittany, is that there’s a lot of resources in terms of time and the kind of materials to work with if you are progressive or left politically. But if you want to think, you just get more space to think. You know, access to library resources, a printer.

We academics absolutely need to think about our labor as workers and to challenge the work conditions that are exploitative and that contribute to unwellness. That said, a lot of the discourse about academic labor that I see circulating doesn’t account for the fact that the structure of how we’re expected to work, as faculty or researchers, is very different from most workers. Academics just get more freedom, frankly, around our schedules around when we work or how much interaction we must have with our colleagues. I mean, there’s just a lot more that we get to do, and it doesn’t mean we do less work.

I might sound shady as hell saying this, but I always say I wasn’t called by anybody except for the department chair, asking me if I want to take the job. My point is I think there’s a difference between finding meaning in our work, which I think is valuable regardless of where you’re at—as long as it doesn’t make you avoid the political realities of the job and the political realities of labor struggles—But I think there is a sense that if we’re intellectuals that somehow we were called to do this work. What are you saying about everybody else? I’ll just say this for me: I don’t use that framing that I was called to do something, even as I understand that people use that framing for different reasons, and it’s not always out of elitism. To me, I find it kind of mystifying about what work we actually do, and under what labor conditions we actually work.

**Brittany:** Yeah, I love that because the idea of being called to a job versus, for me, the calling is more about the work, right? The movement, the work of liberation. And so yes, the job helps support that work, which is actually the crucial, life-giving stuff that I do.

**Antonia:** I appreciate the reframing, Tamara, and you I appreciate you calling me out for mystifying the work of academia, contributing to putting it on a pedestal. Not thinking about it first and foremost as a 9 to 5 because that is part of the mystifying process that keeps people overworked because it’s supposed to be a calling.

**Tamara:** I remember years ago when I worked for the Asian American community organization I had mentioned, we hosted Grace Lee Boggs, who was a big influence on our organization. When we hosted her I got inspired and told her that I was going to drop out of grad school and work as an organizer. And she looked at me and asked if I was sure I want to do that. And she noted how hard organizing was. This is some of the stuff that I think of when we're talking about academic labor versus organizing. It's very different labor. What I know of full-time organizers, they're sometimes working longer hours, or they're having to work much more regimented hours in terms of availability to people or being monitored on the Outlook calendar for what your schedule is, and everybody in the organization knows.

Basically, there's just a different rhythm. Brittany, you noted the summer as when we're not working in a particular way. Well, that's the language of an academic. We work on academic time and academic schedules, which is very different. I think the material thing about why, sometimes, we choose to work in certain spaces isn't always about the salary.

For me, academia actually gave me the space to think and reflect on what I saw and experienced in organizing spaces and build a research agenda thinking through that. One of the things that often happens is people create this idea of "organizing spaces are where the real work is done and academia is not where real work is done." But a lot of organizers don't get the time to really seriously reflect on their work when they're organizing.

**Antonia:** No, that's super helpful about the nitty-gritty of organizing, and organizing as work compared with academia as work. Which brings us to the next question, which is about sociological training. How did your sociological training interact with the other things that you believed in or were fighting for?

**Brittany:** I think academic training can be super problematic in a lot of ways. Because even in departments that claim to be critical, we're getting positivist training. That's what we're getting in most PhD programs. And those things are just really in conflict with what we need to be doing in movement spaces. To give specifics: The IRB can be super problematic when we're thinking about how to incorporate research into movement spaces. There is all these ethics around how much you can compensate people, and if you compensate people too much, then it's coercive. Like, no, it's compensating people for their time. There's ethics around anonymity or confidentiality, and, for organizers we want to name institutions that are harmful, right? Why do they deserve confidentiality?

And then, just the broader question about what does it mean to be objective? That's not a real thing. From the minute we decide a research question, a research topic that we're interested in, it's impacted by who we are, how we're showing up, what we're bringing. And then, it's racist, right? Because white men are allowed to be considered objective, while those of us who are connected to the spaces that we are researching are not allowed. Our work is considered subjective, which I'm fine with.

And then, in academia, timelines with movement work just do not match. For us to do the thinking part and then to publish anything, that can take years. The book that I'm

working on is from my dissertation research, which, you know, I collected that data in 2015. And so, stuff has been published since that time, but if I was just waiting for a book to come out in order for my work to be impactful and wasn't finding other ways to actually engage with the population that I'm studying, like parents who are involved in the child support system, then we can be in a whole new state of affairs with a social issue by the time your research is published.

The time to think, as Tamara pointed out, like that space to go ponder on our research questions and collect data, and then go back in the field and collect some more data and think about it more. Those things allow me to contribute in a different way to movement spaces. Not necessarily in a better way, just in a different way.

**Tamara:** Thank you so much for that, Brittany. I appreciate a lot of things you said about the IRB process, and so forth. For me, I went into sociology as an undergrad because I was really bad at poetry. I was an English major, but I sucked at writing poetry and that seemed like something other English majors at my school were good at. I went to the registrar's office on campus and I read the description for the Sociology major and it was like, "Do you care about inequality? Do you care about the world? Do you want to change...?" And I was like, "Yeah!" I switched to sociology, and then I felt tricked afterwards because I found out it was all this positivist stuff that Brittany was getting at.

I adjuncted at a lot of schools but I've been fortunate to have many students be receptive to the way I taught Sociology. I taught a lot of the intro courses and I often taught Intro to Sociology as kind of sociology of knowledge. I didn't try to make sociology a positivist discipline. I didn't try to make it inherently liberatory. I take great pleasure in developing a syllabus. I think there's something really exciting about what you get to introduce students to.

In the last couple of years, more and more people are thinking critically about policing. I mean it's an unprecedented kind of moment. Now I can say, "Have you heard about the calls to defund, or some of these protests?" And people say, "Yes," even if they're on different sides politically. And sociologists have unfortunately contributed a lot to criminology and to policing programs and policing theories, like broken windows theory. I get to teach about that stuff in the classroom, and to unravel it.

For me, my sociological training, despite all its flaws, helps me appreciate how research is really vital, regardless if it's for a scholarly project or an organizing project. I've done both, including community-based research for a community organization and public education for other organizations. If you want to really understand what you're dealing with politically, it's not going to just come from experience and personal observations. You're going to have to do some systematic research. I think about the research methods and sociological skills that organizers have used, like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) with their research department, or Ella Baker or Robert Moses. I value research. But where I look to see the value of that sociological training or the use of sociology in action has been very diverse.

**Antonia:** I was thinking about Joyce Ladner and how there are models that we can look towards where sociology and activism don't have to be in competition. Joyce

Lander was involved with SNCC. And it does not have to be antithetical to what you're doing to privilege getting better at research.

**Tamara:** Can I just say really quickly about Joyce Ladner? I think there are things you can do with your dissatisfaction. I feel like for me a big part of the critical posture I have towards Sociology and towards academia was just a general sense of dissatisfaction, and having to look for sources on my own. One of the sources I found when I was in grad school was the book *The Death of White Sociology* (Ladner [1973] 1998), which Joyce Ladner edited. And she edited this at a time when there are very few Black women sociologists with PhDs in the academy. She's doing that in a very minoritized position on so many levels. And I wonder sometimes, do some of these younger scholars even understand this was the terrain that people were doing battle in. And do we always appreciate that there is battle being done in the academy? What often happens is academicians think that the political battles are outside the academy. And I think sometimes some of us have an inferiority complex to be honest, where we think there's not real political work being done in the academy.

I wouldn't say this political work is always an organizing campaign. I wouldn't confuse it with that type of activism. But to me, Dr. Ladner's editing of that book and the ideological challenges posed in that book are forms of cultural activism happening in the academy. I just really have a lot of respect for what Dr. Ladner did within sociology as well, not just with sociology outside of the academy.

**Brittany:** Can I follow up on one thing, Tamara, that you said about your experiences that you had being in Philadelphia, and seeking out works and places to be connected to movement spaces? I think though building those types of relationships and really understanding the impact that the community work is having, but also the impact that the university, the negative impact, that the university is having on the community around itself. Like Temple is a perfect example. I think that's another major problem of Sociology, that we have this inequality lens but we just completely separate ourselves from thinking about how we're complicit or actively engaging in the inequality that's happening right outside. Right out back from Temple, walk down Cecil B. Moore Avenue, and what is Temple doing to the communities around it? What's the impact that this has on the people who live there? We see the headlines about the crime on campus. Well, maybe we should stay out of people's neighborhoods, and not be bulldozing people's homes to build more housing for students. I think those questions are super important for sociologists, and I don't think they are dealt with enough.

**Antonia:** Thank you for that sort of extension of Tamara's point about where sociology sees, "Where is the work? Where do you do the work?" The work does not stop at the door of the school where you're teaching.

I'm thinking about influences. So how did you come across Joyce Lander? Could you all shout out what made you into the person you are now?

**Brittany:** My undergrad training in participatory action research under Yasser Payne was super crucial. Dr. Yasser Payne studied under Dr. Michelle Fine at CUNY Graduate Center. I came to undergrad at the University of Delaware planning to go to law school. I was on the prelaw track, that was what I was doing 100%. And then I took



classes in Black American Studies the year that Yasser arrived and got hired on to be on the participatory action research team that was looking at the experiences of Black students, staff, and faculty at UD, and that just was transformative for me. We were talking so much about the uses of research, and I was like, “Wow, like this is what research is. This is how research can be done.” We can actually be people who are real humans, right? Whose entire life does not revolve around the university.

And then definitely the abolitionist thinkers that I follow now. Like, you know, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* (Kaba 2021). It's just a crucial book for my org. We used it last summer at the community workshop. And just having folks sit around and chop up chapters and chop up pieces of that text, and think about how we build alternatives, how we build the communities and the visions that we can't even imagine yet. So, I didn't say her name, but Mariame Kaba has been super crucial in helping me think about those things, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and folks like that who are just giving so much to us all the time, giving us so much, and we're forever grateful.

**Tamara:** A big part of me turning out this way comes from Black faculty and staff members. I attended undergrad at a college in the suburbs of Columbus, and our school was literally 7% nonwhite students. Darryl A. Peal was then the Director of Ethnic Diversity. I look back and it's interesting because I have all these critiques of DEI. But a big part of why a lot of us stayed in college, including at my school, was these diversity directors, and Black and people of color staff members that took a great interest in the status of nonwhite students, and at times, fought for us. Mr. Peal taught one of the first Black Studies courses I ever took. I took courses with a Black professor named Dr. Carter Wilson, in Political Science, when I was getting my Masters in Toledo. He didn't think it was wrong of me to cite Mumia Abu-Jamal. In fact, he was citing Mumia Abu-Jamal in his classes, and he was the first person to introduce me to Foucault. He gave me a book on neo-colonialism. He let me use words like white supremacy in my papers—20-some years ago.

I think about some of these professors or staff members who gave me leeway. They gave me leeway to be explicit in my language. They gave me leeway to ask political questions. They encouraged those type of questions. They liked that students got involved in activism. I would see some of them at protests. So, they gave guidance, but they also encouraged a political sensibility.

And what has also helped me, and it probably sounds strange, is I didn't go to elite schools. Now, non-elite schools and programs still have aspirational status, They often have very narrow ideas of rigor, what good scholarship is, and so forth. But I was in programs where some of that non-elite status can help because, frankly, sometimes you have more room to not do what is traditionally considered rigorous work and to do work that's rigorous to you, and that's meaningful to you. I believe in good standards with our work; I don't think any work should just be considered good work. But I had more room sometimes in those marginal spaces.

And then, also, I purposely moved to Philly because I was encouraged to consider Temple University. I got a good fellowship package there, so, there was a financial reason. But I also wanted to be in a city with certain political activity. Not everybody

thinks about the city that they're going to be in for their grad program. But I also wasn't being vetted by elite schools. And I think being in those marginalized spaces, spaces that were not some of "the rigorous spaces" actually gave me more room to do the work I wanted, while still, hopefully, doing good work, rigorous work.

I'll just give one more shout out, to Anthony Monteiro, who, like me, earned his PhD in Sociology at Temple. In Philly, he was somebody who did all these W.E.B. Du Bois lectures before Dr. Du Bois started getting kind of big in Sociology, where now sociologists are saying, we need to reclaim Du Bois. I'll just give a shout out to Dr. Earl Wright, II, because he was doing that work for over 20 years, reclaiming Dr. Du Bois and the Atlanta School as the first U.S. school of Sociology. Now Dr. Monteiro, you go to all these talks in Philly, and that's where you'd see a whole bunch of people from the city. Many of them who were not trained academics, and who had some critiques of academia, but love to learn about Dr. Du Bois. With Dr. Monteiro I got to see this model of a professor who created political education through his Du Bois lectures.

**Antonia:** I'm so glad that we are having this conversation. This is exactly the kind of thing to demystify how you get from here to there. Because I'm sure some people with political leanings will be reading this, but not know how to plug in.

**Brittany:** Most cities have someone doing something, right? Of course, the major urban centers or metropolitan areas or whatever have more obvious organizing. But, in these rural places, people are doing work, they are putting work in. You know, me being in the South now, and seeing the work people are doing around these races, the DAs, and these racist sheriffs. The organizing around these races is real work. And folks plug in where you are, you can definitely seek to be in a city that's more hospitable to what you need to survive and thrive. But also, if, as we're talking about, you need the job and you are going somewhere because you need the job, I'm certain that there are ways to plug in with work that's being done.

**Antonia:** Let's talk about teaching. Both of you talked a little bit about teaching. But talk specifically about how teaching fits along with your political vision and making the world that you want to see. How does teaching fit into that?

**Brittany:** I've been fortunate at Wake that I've been able to teach seminars, signature seminars, that they've been open to that. I have to teach Intro, which I tried to do as Tamara was saying, not in the traditional way, and to the extent that I can because...not everyone has the capacity to do all of these super creative things all the time, right? We want people to not give scantron exams, but some people are teaching 600 students a semester, so we have to actually talk about the labor conditions that people are teaching under as we're having the conversation about bringing liberation into the classroom.

But yeah, I've been fortunate to teach seminars, so I teach seminars on abolition. I teach a seminar on social justice and social sciences. I teach a seminar on courts and criminal procedure. One of the things that's super important to me, as Tamara was saying, is building the syllabus is a political act. So how is my praxis around syllabus-building representative of my politics? In my social justice class, the entire syllabus is all Black women, femme, and non-binary folks, that's all we read. They do not see a

white person on the syllabus the entire semester, and I think that's important and we literally put-up pictures of the people that we're reading just to reorient.

And not just academic folks, we read stuff by organizers, we read blog posts. If they're thinking about the idea that we're talking about, wherever they are, they could fall on my syllabus. So that stuff is important. I think finding ways to engage in the community, right? But in the social justice class, the students actually work with local grassroots organizations. In the spring they worked with 7 grassroots organizations that I would have some connection to, and contributed to their work, whether that was administrative stuff or helping them plan events. It was an assignment, but I think the students were able to see ways for them to get more active in a real way.

And then having students in the abolition course do virtual teachings that are open to community people. They were well attended. So that has been a transformative experience for me as a faculty member, and just trying to teach in the ways that I wanted to learn and give students that opportunity, and then thinking about how to encourage community building in the classroom. Because we're often reinforcing this individualism. In my seminars I really try to think about practical ways that we can build community, because community building is a huge part of movement work. And so, if students are reframing how they approach community and engaging with people in building relationships, then I think it serves the movement work.

I have an assignment in the seminars called community-building activities, where they have an option of about 11 different things that they can do. They have to complete so many of them throughout the semester. Some are like sending messages to folks whose work we've read or whose work we've engaged, planning a study session for their peers, attending campus events, different things to actually get them connected in ways. And so, then, how do I take that practice into the community, in the political education, and in the summer workshops that I do? Thinking about how our praxis is showing up in all of the different spaces that we inhabited, I think, is important around education.

**Tamara:** There's a lot of practices that Brittany shared that I also do in my classroom, and I have a certain kind of sensibility towards it in a similar way. But I don't see teaching as activism. I think you can have an activist orientation, that's part of how you design your syllabus and think about things like that. Like the way I design my syllabus, I think a lot about issues regarding giving people second chances and stuff. So, there's certain political sensibilities that inform the design of my class. But I don't think it's useful for me to approach teaching as activism or to consider showing up for my job as activism, even if I have activist tendencies that shape how I design or teach the class. Because, ultimately, as professors, we have a relative position of power in the classroom, and that to me is not the best way to approach an activist project, when you are in a position where you could give a student a grade.

I have become increasingly interested in how, and this goes to something that Brittany said earlier, the term scholar-activist is constructed. I don't think we interrogate that enough. I think what's happened sometimes is that a lot of us will see what we do in the classroom as activism. Regarding myself, I've wondered how much of this is, "I

want to still be seen as doing activism, because I used to be in organizing spaces.” And because there are all these critiques of academics, and I think nonwhite academics get critiqued quite a lot for being in the academy and get kind of picked apart in a particular way about, “What is our real commitment, and what work are you really doing?” and so forth. I had to start thinking about, is my teaching really activism or is it that I want to see it as activism because I’m trying to maintain some glorified image of myself? And I decided for myself that it’s not activism, even if I have activist tendencies.

I also think that, as I said before, working at a college that’s broke and having to be involved in labor activism, having to deal with colleagues and work with them as union members and deal with the possibility of a strike, this all made me think a lot more about the terms of work that allow us to do more interesting work in the classroom. This goes to Brittany’s point about, if you want to challenge scantron culture and if you want to think about a different grading system, well, that is about work conditions, not just our individual political leanings as a professor. The work conditions often impact the feasibility of what we want to do in the classroom. And for me, that is what I think part of the activism in the academy is about.

I also feel that there’s this weird way we devalue our own work that we are doing in the classroom or as scholars, because of the sensibility that we’re supposed to be doing more politically, or that we’re not real authentic political figures, or something like that, this kind of inferiority complex I was speaking of. For me, I value the work I do. I try to do good work. I try to think about some of these things Brittany was saying about the classroom I create. But I also think that I do that as an individual and that I need to be mindful of the relative institutional power faculty have in relation to the students, even those of us who are subject to racism from colleagues, administrators, and students. Also, I think everyone should be allowed to be involved in activism on their own terms, and students shouldn’t be required to see what they’re doing in the classroom as activism either. I think, though, that activism and organizing are necessary to defend or to expand the space in which to do more critical social justice-oriented teaching. So that’s the distinction I’ve made.

**Antonia:** That’s super useful, Tamara, and I appreciate the alternate framing of that, which brings us back again to academic work as work. And that changing the conditions of academic work could take activism, but it may not inherently be activist, as far as what you do in your classroom. And if everything is called scholar-activism, then that doesn’t have any meaning.

And I also want to underline Tamara saying that faculty of color have been saddled with the need to be scholar-activists in a way that isn’t useful, and in the way that can label everything as scholar-activism, and in a way that devalues what scholars of color are already doing. So, I want to underline, bold, and highlight that as a critique of the project of scholar-activism as to what it is and what it isn’t.

Next question: What is Sociology’s role in this time? We are in treacherous political times. I remember reading something about how Sociology had a moment of reckoning in the ‘sixties, because they didn’t anticipate social movements taking off the way that they did. And then we’re in another...you know, in my lifetime, I’ve never seen a time

as dangerous as this. That's my kind of reading of it, and it seems like sociologists should be on the front lines. But I don't know what we're doing and that could be my own sort of not being plugged in enough. So, what is Sociology's role in this time? How could we be useful or more useful?

**Tamara:** Yeah, you know, I'll say this: I'm not invested in kind of saving Sociology. It's a site in which I work and a site of possibilities, good and bad. But I'm not really invested in Sociology being a leading voice on something. I really think it's also about finding your people and finding people to be useful with, whether that's in your academic discipline or in the academy, or not. To me, it's more what would you like to see in the world? And what projects are there, and what projects can you co-create with others? Or initiate, and then go from there, and whatever skills you have, to bring them, use them with others, and then develop new skills. So, I'm not as concerned, personally, with Sociology being at the forefront of leading a conversation. I think for me, it's just more of what are the conversations and what are projects I would like to get plugged into, and where can I show up?

I'm someone who's not highly visible, in that you don't find a lot of images of me in a lot of places, and I have worked very hard to cultivate that. I like to go for high impact, medium ego, low visibility, which I'm trying to reconcile with my interest in being a leftist thirst trap.

But in 2020, there were these conversations I wanted to be a part of and I was like, well, I guess I'm going to have to be visible and be on the Zoom. So, to me, it's less about Sociology being at the forefront, and more, what projects do I want to be a part of, what conversations do I want to be a part of, what work do I want to help bring more attention to because I think they're doing good political work, and what role can I play in doing that? And how do I partner with others to do that, whether they're sociologists or not? That's my approach.

**Brittany:** Yeah, I love everything that you just said, Tamara. I love this: Low visibility. I wish I was a little less visible. But I've been photographed many times at protests and curse too much. Now people get a kick of how much I curse because I have a real silly South Jersey cursing streak. So that's been live-streamed too many times for me to hide my face. But I wish I could, because, for me, I think there's so many other people who I want to listen to talking about these things. And I wish academics were not just getting...No shade, but there are folks getting grants on abolitionist projects that, like, did they know what abolition was 3 years ago? Probably not, and that's scary to me. I don't think that you need to read all the things to be grounded, but I do think you have to be grounded in an abolitionist practice. And I just feel maybe a lot of academics are not. For me, that means, sometimes, most of the time, that we need to sit down and listen and be quiet. So important, so important. And then also the pitfalls of monetizing crises and sociology.

**Antonia:** Can we talk a little bit about self-care? Because Tamara, I know your research is kind of turning towards wellness. How do you care for your spirit? If you think a lot about suffering that people endure, it's hard to kind of keep going. How do you all care for your spirit?

**Brittany:** I have gotten a lot of my lessons about care work from disability justice spaces, and not thinking about it as self-care, necessarily, but as community care, because I am part of the community. How do we care for ourselves as embedded in community is something my organization thinks about a lot. One of the working groups that we have is our healing and transformative justice group. We call them tap-ins, as a way people get tapped into the work. But we have spaces, literally just healing spaces, just for Black folks. We have healing spaces for Black and Brown folks...And then creating a care web, that's literally something I'm doing after I get off this Zoom. Our workshop this summer was around disability, justice and care work. We read books like *Care Work* (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018) and other texts to help us think about what does this mean? Way beyond, you know, like, take a hike or take a bubble bath, like those things are important. But how do we actually build an infrastructure for us to receive care and to give care in a mutual way?

**Tamara:** What helps me is being okay with having boundaries and feeling that my work is enough. I've seen a lot of people become exhausted and burn out, whether in organizing spaces I was in as either a paid staff member or as a volunteer. And I've seen a lot of it in academia. I've just seen a lot of it, especially among nonwhite people.

Regarding self-care, something I think a lot about is, how do we work for better labor and socio-economic conditions, so that we don't have to do so much stopgap work? Because a lot of times, what happens is we're compensating with each other, with our time and energy and labor, and calling it collective care, when we're not getting what we should be getting from institutions or the state. I've shifted my focus to kind of thinking about care work as what political demands can we make together to have a different kind of environment in which we relate to each other.

But I also have thought a lot about just being okay with establishing certain boundaries and not being suckered into guilt around like, "Are you doing enough?" Because that is something that happens a lot to nonwhite people, and particularly to nonwhite women, in these institutions. And it can come from everyone in terms of being expected to prove that we deserve to be there, or prove that, we're politically authentic by giving more and more and more unpaid labor. And I don't find that healthy, I think it's a very unhealthy and unfair expectation. So, what's helped me personally, along with politically thinking about labor politics.

Then, just on a very superficial level, I try not to think that deeply about things when I'm not doing certain work. Like, I think Bobby Flay is the most talented white man alive and I just watch non-stop episodes of *Beat Bobby Flay*. I just finished watching a marathon of *How I Met Your Mother*. I mean, this is total crap, right? When I'm just trying to chill out, I watch white crap. I watch white people just doing crappy shows, and I like it.

**Antonia:** As we wind down, anything else you want to say about scholar-activism?

**Brittany:** Yeah, I think so. Generally speaking, one part of my practice of abolition is dreaming and reimagining and imagining for the first time. And I think that's antithetical to academia in a lot of ways; everything is about evidence-based. Yes, I love doing the research, but sometimes there's not a way to do research, because that's what

we're trying to build. It's so bad that we couldn't even possibly imagine and that's, you know, drawing on all the abolitionist thinkers now, and folks who are doing work, and folks that have been doing abolitionist work since we were enslaved. If I'm going to give a call to action, even though I don't necessarily like that, but a call to action for academics and sociologists is for us to make space to dream about what freedom and what liberation is in all these different ways.

**Tamara** I've been thinking a lot about how it's about having a kind of critical posture to the space you're in, but also acknowledging that you're in this space, and that there's a certain desire to be in the space. Academia is a unique space; you don't just accidentally end up in academia. You don't just accidentally end up with PhD. Dr. Fred Moten said that there's this kind of academic narcissism, where on one hand we talk about how miserable we are and how we don't want to go to work cause we're so miserable, but then we say, "Oh, we're so privileged to be here," and he's like, it's just a double-edge kind of narcissism. This is not about being a cheerleader for academia, but I think there's this weird tension where people will act like they were forced here or something. Everywhere that people are working—with the exception of prisons or detention centers or when they've been trafficked—people are not being forced to work, *per se*. People make choices, albeit constrained choices, about their jobs all the time, to challenge the conditions or to quit.

Now, what are we going to do while we're here, what is the work we do that we hope is liberatory? What is the organizing work that you feel that you want to do within the university, to make more space for it being liberatory, and against the university, to challenge its current role in the larger society? I don't think it's useful to treat it as just a job, or to make it a guilt trip, or to act like you can't do anything, or to just berate yourself about your privilege. Given that you made a choice to pursue a PhD, and then, if you were able to get a job in academia by pursuing it, what are you going to do now?

And this goes to the scholar-activism thing. I feel there's a weird way that some people will try to negotiate their own kind of anxieties about being an academic by pointing out that they're the bigger scholar-activist than other people. It can include people sometimes trying to create an identity of themselves as a scholar-activist when maybe they're not doing much activism. But it can also be some people really wanting to let other people know "I'm a scholar-activist and y'all ain't shit if you're just scholars" or something like that. That too, I think, can come from a certain anxiety of being employed in academia, like saying, "I'm not like the rest of my co-workers" and somehow you didn't choose to be here.

I think that's part of the tension of understanding that it's a job, that it's not inherently activism. A lot of workers who are not academics challenge their work conditions as activists. They don't have the luxury of saying, "Me showing up and doing this work is activism." You don't have people say, "I showed up to work at Walmart and I'm an activist, because I showed up for my job." That's a luxury, or at least, that's a kind of a framework that certain workers can wrestle with, like cultural workers. Or academics can frame our work that way. But many other workers work at jobs that don't get read as contributions to society, and to engage in activism, they have to do activism.

**Antonia:** And I want to add to what you said about the particularly unique anxiety, I would say, of faculty of color, thinking about what it means to be an academic. So, on top of how most faculty are resistant to thinking about academic work as work and then to be a Black person. I'm from the Black middle-class, so there's that, and then what I do for my living is I write these books or fail to write the books. That's what I do. I think people of color, in particular, come up with a narrative that justifies that in the world.

**Tamara:** This is what I'll say about Mariame Kaba, having collaborated with her. You might notice sometimes on Twitter that Dr. Kaba will say something like, "Bring your small stones to the pile," or "Everybody has a contribution." And something I think is really awesome about Dr. Kaba is she encourages everyone to get plugged in whatever way they can. Are you good with graphic design, well, help make this flyer. Can you design a T-shirt? People are quilting some of her statements, and you can sell that to fund raise. So, there are all these ways she encourages people to get plugged in whatever way they can. You don't really see her publicly berating people saying you're not doing enough, per se. She might say that about the Democrats, but they deserve it, right? But she really values the stone you bring to the pile.

I believe the reference to stones that Dr. Kaba is making is gesturing at a passage by Alice Walker, discussing how she used to feel guilty because she wasn't doing some of the courageous acts that she saw other civil rights figures doing. And she said she had to work through that guilt because it can be immobilizing. And how you can kind of opt out of struggle, or you don't bother making a contribution because you think that only the biggest contribution matters. Alice Walker said in this passage that it's about "bringing our small, imperfect stones to the pile." You know, make our contributions, and understand them for what they are, and that they can matter.

Like I said, doing your job as a professor isn't necessarily activism. But doing a good job in the classroom in terms of actually teaching anti-racist education, or making ideological interventions in the scholarship, all that is important labor, and they are contributions, they are stones, they contribute. I don't think we should reinvent our stones to make them appear as something different, to make them larger than they are, because that usually comes from a place of, as Alice Walker put it, a place of anxiety or a place of, maybe guilt, that we're not doing enough. And to be okay with knowing that contributing something isn't always the same as activism or organizing. Because activism requires activism and organizing requires organizing.

**Brittany:** I wear this little necklace that has honey in it, and it's supposed to be the amount of honey that a bee produces in its lifetime. And when you look at it it's just this little, tiny thing, and it just reminds me that all these tiny contributions are so crucial to our ecosystem. If these tiny contributions go away, then we don't exist. I use it to remind myself we're all just chipping away, we're doing little, tiny chips. Each of those chips is necessary to bring down all the things that we want to see go away, and to rebuild the things that we want to see that will make us free.



### **Reflexive Statement**

Antonia Randolph My contributions to struggles for social justice today are minimal. I fought for queer rights as an undergraduate at Spelman College, where I co-led the first chartered lesbian and bisexual student organization on campus. I also was a member of Queer to the Left in Chicago, a multi-issue coalition of queer people who organized against gentrification, police brutality, war, and the commodification of Pride. Since becoming a professor, I have not been involved in activism.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **References**

- Kaba, Mariame. 2021. *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*. edited by T. K. Nopper. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Ladner, Joyce. [1973] 1998. *Death of White Sociology*. Reprint edition. Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press.
- Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. 2018. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.