

A Charter for Civic Engagement *and* Holistic Academic Process

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Rejecting the conventional academic wisdom that tells us to “put community-based programs and partnerships on hold or on the side until we achieve tenure,” I resolve this day to hold my multiple subjectivities together by remaining holistic, committed, concerned, connected, and compassionate, but most importantly, centered in the constellation of my community. I will not be (re)moved. I will not be situated in an Academic Siberia – cold, isolated, alone, without connection, without story, without experiential memory. Upon traversing the borderlands of the Academy, I cling to my bundle – the intricacies and nuances of my personal landscape, my contested identity, and the artifacts of that contestation, recognizing that validation and reward lies in the confluence of Civic Engagement *and* Holistic Academic Practice—the meta-language of significant contribution.

Contemporary paradigms of civic engagement sanction a one-way storytelling trajectory, which disrupts a potentially holistic mosaic of academic experience. Through institutional mandate, researchers and scholars become expert interpreters touting the value of hierarchical constructs, imposing and validating various versions of the binary: *us and them*. Progressive paradigms of civic engagement translate community-based programs and partnerships into rich landscapes of potential data to be mined and then integrated into our academic experiences and those of our learning communities. Researchers and scholars who accept the Charter for Civic Engagement *and* Holistic Academic Practice and subsequently, a post-progressive paradigm of Civic Engagement will avoid the affirmation or denial of any experience or knowledge, but will instead embrace a collective space of disequilibrium understanding that “...we will arrive at every encounter shaped by our pasts and betrayed by our assumptions” (Bateson, 2000).

Challenging contemporary paradigms of civic engagement involves negating ourselves as *the* experts. Redefining progressive paradigms of civic engagement means infusing our process with reciprocal storytelling – negotiating vulnerability, blurring the boundary between *us and them*. Embracing the confluence of civic engagement and a holistic academic process involves recognizing that our rapidly changing world requires an ever-changing script, one that demands improvisation and grace, one that reveals both the full range of our human potential and the interconnectedness of our experiences.

My history as a single mother, a renegade daughter, a sister, a believer estranged from the common language of sacred protocol, a vagabond on a journey that rarely leads home... *my* history is inextricably linked to my yearning for civic engagement *and* holistic academic process. I cannot separate myself from the bloodlines of my family story, the bones of my present day experiences and the sinew of my future connections. They are alternately relinquished, broken, and unraveled by my dynamic and contested identities. My Lakota name, “Winona,” (which translates as *First Born Daughter*) along with an identifying surname to track both bloodline and blood quantum, is listed, as it has been for generations, on the official government rolls of the Ft. Peck Assiniboine/Sioux Tribe, a group currently hailing from Poplar Montana, but formerly associated with the entire landscape of the Great Plains of the North American Continent. My family connections embody the ongoing travails and triumphs of *First Contact* and *Manifest*

Destiny. This is my legacy. I bring to the Academy and to my civic engagement experiences, an intellectual tradition steeped in the drama of human story (Behar, 1996).

In the interest of exploration and connection, incorporating “field trips” into my freshman composition classes, during my graduate fellowship teaching years, quickly became a critical process of community-based work that sustained my scholarly process. For two years (four semesters), students in my English 101 classes participated in two very specific, yet related field trips during which they pondered and applied the same research queries to both spheres: What constitutes a history? How are collective and/or individual histories preserved? Through what means are these specific histories preserved? In preparation for these field trips, students participated in small reading groups in which they discussed texts that would familiarize them with the context of our excursions. At both The Nez Perce Interpretive Center and The House of Charity (a homeless shelter for men), my students were challenged to be listeners, processors of story. I asked them to be prepared to share their own experiences, to share previously held beliefs if asked, to take risks, to offer up as a sacrifice to community, their version of the human experience. These opportunities for Civic Engagement were not framed as typical service learning activities. We did not go to serve the populations into whose communities we were invited. Instead, we went to participate and to silently consider and witness the inevitable clashing of cultural spheres:

We were going to eat lunch with these people. I entered the serving line and realized I needed to be humble. This was not difficult; I didn't hold myself in a higher regard than any of the people there. I was more afraid of hurting someone's pride, of infringing on their privacy. This was their life, not mine. What right did I have to ask questions and eat with them? I was going to go home to school, a job, and a soft warm bed after this. They were not...A middle-aged man approached my table. I listened attentively and he watched me eat. He told me that he owned a pair of old football pads which he wore to feel good. He told me he was lonely.

Field Trip to *The House of Charity*--- Student Reflection, 2006

Although, dialogical interactions with community may contradict validated and/or academically represented histories, particularly those emerging from a “no-contact” theoretical position, they may support a *presence* respectfully negotiated in the first person: the primary research experience—the story of *us and them*.

Finally, a university culture that acknowledges, accommodates, and encourages civic engagement will defy the constraints of space and time, will encourage and embrace an erasure of boundary, will strive to be known as a “community university” not as a “university community,” will respond to the crescendo of diverse voices, will be known for its innovative commitment to a *holistic academic process*...

Works Cited

- Bateson, Mary. *Full Circles, Overlapping Lives: Culture and Generation in Transition*. New York: Random House, 2001.
- Behar, Ruth. *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.