Becoming, Beckoning, and Belonging as Educational Activists

Whitney Neumeyer Roach (ID)
University of South Carolina
wr12@mailbox.sc.edu

Rhonda Jeffries (ID)
University of South Carolina
rjeffries@sc.edu

ABSTRACT

This reflective chapter explores the nuanced experiences of two faculty members within a university's College of Education, one in the nascent stages of their career as an assistant professor and the other a seasoned professor with over three decades of academic service. Their narrative experiences pivot around the intricacies of assuming roles as educational activists within the academic domain, specifically in the context of "be-ing" Ed-activists. As the chapter delves into strategies for supporting and mentoring emerging academics, the authors invite scholarly practitioners pursuing an EdD to embrace activism while fostering a culture of belonging within this realm. This deliberate exploration challenges prevailing Western norms regarding being, knowledge, and success within academia and ultimately contributes to a broader discourse on creating more inclusive and diverse academic environments where all stakeholders actively work to counter injustice.

KEYWORDS
educational activism, EdD, scholarly practitioners

Educational activism builds on a belief that education workers (e.g., teachers, mentors, guides, and leaders) intentionally embrace their capacity to support students, mentees, learners, and colleagues toward critical agency. Ideally, such agency is born from highly collaborative, dialogical interactions where individuals prioritize respect for others' needs and abilities in the pursuit of creating a socially just world (Stetsenko, 2020). Individual acts of social justice agency require a collective of diverse mindsets with whom one can reflect and grow—a community of invested agents that acknowledges, values, and merges all voices toward systemic transformation in education.

To showcase such collaboration, this reflective article delves into the nuanced experiences of two faculty members in the University of South Carolina's Doctor of Education (EdD) program; one is a seasoned professor with three decades of academic service, and the other is in the nascent stages of their career as an assistant professor. Using counternarratives, we explore significant experiences and complex intricacies of being EdD-activists. Negotiating our respective academic journeys to explore becoming, beckoning, and belonging as requisites for personal growth and activist agency, we highlight the value of developing educational communities that foster inclusion and engender evolution.

As a critical practice, reflexivity encourages activists to continue self-examination and reflection regarding their beliefs, biases, and positionalities within educational contexts (Soedirgo & Glas, 2020). Enacting a reflexive practice showcases how one's experiences of marginalization(s) intersect/connect with other forms of oppression and power and how these intersections shape one's understanding of social justice. Along our continued journeys of *becoming,* we regularly seek out other educational activists, beckoning to them in

hopes of generating activist spaces and opportunities for continued growth through generative discourse and critical self-reflection. Aligned with the co-editors' aim for this issue, we hope this article will support the continuation of collaborative conversations using a mutual learner mindset (Shainis, 2020) among teacher educators and scholarly practitioners in K–12 and higher education spaces.

AN ACTIVIST'S ROAD TO BECOMING, BECKONING AND BELONGING

The interplay between becoming, beckoning, and belonging engenders a continuous cycle of growth, connection, and transformation wherein each stage informs the next. Such transformation illustrates how personal evolution might fuel collective engagement to foster greater belonging. As we navigate this path, our experiences of marginalization and resistance undergird activist commitments, compelling us to invite others to join in this work. In the following section, we explore the concept of becoming—not as a fixed state but as an ongoing, fluid process that challenges traditional notions of identity, agency, and activism.

Becoming

Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (1987), this article explores the conceptualization of *becoming* as a dynamic, fluid process without definitive endpoints. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) emphasized that "becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; it is the in-between" (p. 293). Such a description implies a state transcending traditional binary oppositions and hierarchical structures where the act of becoming is a perpetual milieu that grows

and overspills, beckoning to others while representing a continuous, evolving journey rather than a linear progression to "be" (Suk, 2015). Embracing this rhizome notion of becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) challenges understandings of being as a fixed destination and instead emphasizes a journey of continual self-reflection, reflexivity, and personal growth.

Becoming an educational activist originates in myriad ways from personal, academic, professional, and community influences. Individuals leaning toward activism have noted the development of advocacy skills and socialization toward an activist mindset from parental role models (Kimbell et al., 2016). In the absence of this familial dynamic, structural contradictions that pervade public spaces like schools discourage individuals from becoming activists when their recognition of social inequities and subsequent efforts to mediate these conditions are met with resistance from established hierarchy (Kirshner, 2015). The trajectory of teachers becoming activists is multilayered as they often struggle between the theoretical charge to fundamentally teach social justice and the practical challenges they confront regarding their personal biases that follow them into the professional workspace and cloud their consciousness and commitment to the cause (Luguetti & Oliver, 2019). Furthermore, even when teachers are committed to fostering social justice through their classroom culture and curricula, many of the critical lessons that students learn from participation in activist-minded opportunities do not emerge in formal classroom settings; rather, in extra-curricular activities and community-based programs (Carey et al., 2021). Activism, while rhetorically appreciated in many settings, is undervalued in actuality, and becoming an activist is often performed and perceived as a radical act against societal norms.

The process of becoming is a vital aspect of educational activism, encompassing the fluidity of identity, the cultivation of agency, and the practice of reflexivity. As individuals embark on their journeys of becoming, they not only transform themselves but also contribute to the collective efforts toward social justice and equity. This ongoing process of becoming invites educational activists to embrace their roles as change agents, fostering a culture of collaboration and solidarity that is essential for creating a more just and equitable world.

Beckoning

At the heart of educational activism lies the imperative to beckon others to the journey of transformative change. In addition to a reflexive practice, beckoning involves creating spaces for collective engagement and critical dialogue, inviting individuals to contribute their voices and perspectives to social change in a deliberate effort to cultivate communities characterized by collaboration and solidarity. By beckoning others, we seek to amplify the voices of those who have historically been silenced and marginalized via their identities, experiences, and access. This act of calling others in empowers individuals to contribute meaningfully to the pursuit of social justice while fostering a sense of shared purpose and collective responsibility. Beckoning is not merely an invitation but a call to action, urging individuals to join in the ongoing process of transformative change.

In practice, beckoning involves honoring individual purviews, encouraging a collective to engage in meaningful dialogue and collaboration toward addressing inequity (Muwanguzi et al., 2023). In this context, beckoning to others catalyzes transformative change, inviting individuals to reflect on their experiences and the impacts of

their actions (Purcell, 2017). The act of beckoning can take various forms, such as organizing community forums, workshops, and collaborative projects. By generating activist collectives, one creates opportunities for dialogue while empowering individuals' agency toward activism and acknowledging that social justice requires a collective (Bidandi et al., 2021).

Belonging

Deconstructing dominant ideologies is a monumental task requiring collective efforts. While engendering a unified sense of belonging is a goal and a prerequisite for meaningful engagement with/in social justice/activism, it involves more than mere inclusion; it requires creating spaces where individuals feel genuinely valued and respected. Embracing a sense of belonging is essential to fostering educational communities and activism that support and nurture various individuals. A sense of belonging is particularly crucial for marginalized individuals as it protects against numerous emotional and physical deficits (Greenfield & Marks, 2010; Kitchen et al., 2012; Shields, 2008).

As human beings, we constitute a complex amalgamation of historical exclusionary practices and individual lived experiences. Those with dichotomous identities often find themselves in a liminal state, expected to assimilate into the dominant culture while never fully being accepted. This compounding of dichotomous identities, defined as double consciousness (Du Bois, 1961), positions us, as marginalized educational activists, to impact change across difference. Residing in these liminal spaces, however, reveals possibilities for defining new, fluid parameters for enacting change. Within these new spaces, in-between being included and excluded, third spaces (Bhabha & Rutherford, 2006) or borderlands (Anzaldua, 1991) allow individuals to examine their roles further, understand dominant societal structures, and deconstruct dominant ideologies.

COUNTERNARRATIVES ON ACTIVISM

The work of counter-storytelling, particularly by those marginalized by race, gender, sexuality, etc., requires an ongoing negotiation with the past while simultaneously looking toward the future. As professors and educational activists who embody marginalized identities, we experience and represent dichotomies—successful yet marginal. Grappling with these various facets of success, access, and marginalization creates alternative ways of understanding and viewing the world.

Activism requires ongoing negotiations with yourself, with the ever-changing world around you, and with myriad people of various backgrounds and identities. As such, the act of *being* an activist is not a set destination but rather a continuous evolving journey of becoming. As activists, we practice self-reflection and reflexivity—practices that work to further expose how we have been marginalized and/or benefited from injustice and how we might address our educational and activist practices accordingly. Practices of reflexivity and self-reflection involve critical engagement with one's beliefs and experiences. While self-reflection is an inward-looking process that fosters personal awareness, reflexivity demands an ongoing, dynamic examination of how individual experiences are shaped by and contribute to larger sociopolitical contexts. Through reflexivity, activists move beyond self-awareness to actively challenge and transform the structures that inform their understanding of social justice.

To enact change, activism requires a collective of diverse people working toward the same goal. Developing a collective of diverse people requires beckoning others—ensuring a call that is difficult to overlook. By calling people in (i.e., beckoning), we work to establish an activist community where a multitude of people with various backgrounds and identities feel they belong.

The following counternarratives illustrate how becoming EdD-activists unfolds in lived experiences, often shaping how we enact educational activism. By sharing our journeys, we offer insight into how activism emerges from complex intersections of identity, experience, and institutional structures. These narratives demonstrate that activism is not a solitary pursuit, but rather a collective endeavor rooted in reflexivity, mentorship, and the persistent call to action.

Remembering Rhonda

Becoming an activist was never a conscious decision for me. Growing up in an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church full of Black educators, entrepreneurs, and other professionals, the activist mindset of Richard Allen, founder of the AME church, was well entrenched among the membership. While I may have adopted a critical consciousness from my parents, my church family reinforced the civil rights messages that were prominent during my formative years. Having narrowly missed the experience of segregated schooling in the mid to late 1960s in the southern U.S. town of my birth, I had little concept of being centered as a public school student. I had only one Black elementary-level teacher, two Black middle-level teachers, and two Black secondary level teachers during my K–12 years in spaces where I was othered more often than not. This disenfranchised experience in schools, so vastly different from the empathy I experienced in church, bolstered my perspectives on inclusivity and equity.

With a congregation full of Black educators, Sunday School was an extension of their professional lives, and these teachers treated that golden hour they had each week with the Sunday School students as critical. While I, along with my fellow Sunday School attendees, secretly ridiculed the teachers for drilling us with self-esteem encouragement alongside academic support, much later in life, I understood they were mitigating the damaging effects of our educational lives in predominantly White classrooms and schools. They understood the cultural and curricular challenges we were confronted with as Black students, and they endeavored to compensate for what was missing from our schooling experiences. They modeled activism for us and expected us to assume that role for the remainder of the week until we returned to them for reinforcement. These lessons were my foundation, as I will never forget our weekly recitation: "I *am* somebody. I *am* somebody." That chant rang powerfully under future attacks intended to convince me otherwise.

Between the lessons of these powerful teachers in church and my parents' high expectations, all invested parties anticipated me furthering my education beyond high school. Inherent in my future was the hope that the activism modeled for me since childhood would be a fundamental outcome of my professional goals. After earning a degree in English literature, wandering around the career landscape, and running from teaching as if it were the plague, one of those church teachers from my youth corralled me into working part-time as an Adult Basic Education and GED instructor at a community college. In my mind I justified this departure from my avoidance because it was part-time and not really teaching; but once I started, it *was* teaching, and I loved it. I saw hope come alive in middle-aged adults who were finally learning to read and noted a sense of satisfaction emerge among young people who did not flourish in the traditional high school setting but were focused on accomplishing the goal of earning a GED. I seized this opportunity to embrace teaching as a powerful, life-changing profession—one that enabled me to be the activist I was intended to be from childhood.

I went on to earn a PhD in Social Foundations of Education, and my activist mindset was ignited. The entire program was built around the idea that *we*—the doctoral students, the faculty, and the community with whom we conducted research—were actively changing our world. My White male mentor intentionally fostered inclusivity by recruiting a highly diverse, nationally representative population of doctoral students who were collectively engaged in building a cadre of scholarly activists who left the program and replicated his model at universities across the country. Once again, I had benefited from the direct influence of teachers and professors who boldly challenged national and global injustice through education. With the tools and the confidence to continue, I have spent these past 30 years becoming the activist I was designed to be—teaching, mentoring, guiding and leading educational professionals using the personal, academic, professional, and community influences that shaped me.

Beckoning others to join the call was clearly modeled for me by my mentor, George Noblit, whose influence was so powerful that when his wife hosted a milestone birthday party for him, hundreds of his former students attended to honor his legacy. His influence was most compelling because it centered on practice as much as it was grounded in supportive theoretical constructs. Ultimately, the work was repetitive to the point that it became unwritten policy, which can, at times, function more effectively, automatically, and without question. Despite challenges from professors outside my doctoral program and administrators outside my doctoral department and college of education, and even an occasional challenge from within the program cohort, the culture of the program supported a continuous respect for dialogue from diverse voices and perspectives. The mission was not occasional, but threaded throughout the course content, the research agendas and projects that we pursued, and the support we intended to provide across communities to sustain the work.

Imagine my dismay when my first university position was in a program that had never hired a person of color or one who identified as female prior to my accepting the "two birds with one stone" offer. This factor, alone, is an inadequate explanation for the profound culture in the department that appreciated academic leaders who actively and consistently undermined community. Department meetings were used to discuss personal hobbies that excluded me, and collegiality included offers to grab soft drinks from my fellow faculty members' offices if I ever found myself thirsty. Discussions about curriculum development, student support, or program mission were sorely missing from the professional conversation, and my requests for department policies, bylaws, and tenure and promotion criteria were met with looks of confusion as my colleagues dismissed my need for concern. In response to this hostile environment, I spent much of my time trying to reconcile what I had learned about advocating for students and educating for social justice with the ambivalence on good days and antagonism on others that was the prevailing behavior from my colleagues. Battle fatigue—a multitude of adjectives could precede that noun—drove me to seek another

position where I could actively support students' dreams, and students could reciprocally support my dream to expand and enhance opportunities for activism.

Once I joined the University of South Carolina as faculty in an EdD program, my initial work entailed determining how I might envision an activist mindset and mission. After a couple of years teaching and advising a few doctoral students, I realized the untapped potential of the program to beckon colleagues toward the work of EdD-activism and embed the purpose of this work throughout the curriculum. Early years in this program were spent primarily revising the EdD to focus intently on equity and inclusivity through our required core courses. Research and professional development courses were developed to build upon the foundational core study, and specific dissertation research typically evolved from students' commitment to the cause. While the initial framework for developing EdD-activists was in place, the community required for this to happen was in a state of flux.

Belonging to a cadre of critically conscious individuals is crucial to sustaining the activist agenda. Promoting activism is not a task that is easily undertaken alone. For the first two-thirds of my career as an EdD faculty member, I labored to find equilibrium among the EdD program and graduate school standards, my personal and professional expectations, and students' personal and academic capabilities. I learned through trial and error to successfully meet my students where they are on their current journeys and carefully move them to new places of understanding themselves and the broader curriculum they encounter as educators and human beings. I frequently felt a great sense of loneliness without a cadre of faculty who were navigating similar terrain or who harbored similar goals.

I am grateful to have eventually become affiliated with a community of faculty members who embody an activist stance and willfully share the work of actively advancing and improving themselves and others. During the latter third of my career, the exponential growth of the EdD as a fully online program created the need to expand our faculty, and we cultivated a collection of phenomenal, diverse individuals who understood and embraced the mission. The final piece needed to foster a culture of *activism*—solving problems through collective thinking and deliberate action—was in place, and I experienced belonging for the first time as a career professional. While there were glimpses of shared purpose prior to this time, I, more often than not, felt alone in my pursuit of participating in and supporting a program where faculty highly valued students as fellow producers of knowledge. We now have a critical mass of faculty who are deeply invested in improving communities through the proliferation of scholarly practitioners in K–12 and higher education. This group of faculty blends outcome and process driven goals by constantly collecting data from student cohorts, repeatedly reviewing policies and procedures that impact student experience, and applying curriculum as an evolving experience to address the multifaced needs of our EdD scholars (Gardner & Mendoza, 2023). We acknowledge the unique nature of EdD-activism, provide our students with the tools to address complex educational problems, and join them in belonging to a lifelong community of scholars from which to draw inspiration and resolve. Transitioning my work into the hands of future-minded faculty, like my colleagues in the Curriculum Studies program, in particular Elizabeth and Suha, co-editors of this issue, and Whit, whose narrative follows, I hold unwavering belief and trust that they will continue to advocate for equity and inclusivity of marginalized individuals through their EdD-activism.

Witnessing Whit

From my early experiences as a K–12 student through my career as an elementary educator, I have consistently found myself positioned as an outsider, alienated by the very institutions that purported to support me. This sense of displacement drove my academic interest in theory, which emerged out of a profound confusion and desire to understand the world around me and my place within it. As hooks (1991) reflected, "I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing" (p. 1). Similarly, my engagement with theory was not merely intellectual; it was a matter of survival and finding a sense of belonging.

I have long struggled with a persistent sense of not belonging, yet simultaneously attempted to conform in order to fit to the idealized roles of student, educator, and human being. My experiences of "misfitting," as Ahmed (2007) termed it, were not simply matters of personal discomfort but reflections of a deeply embedded social reality that shaped my academic and personal development. I continuously negotiate the tension between how others perceived me and how I perceived myself.

Over time, I recognized the profound connections between my identity as a queer, nonbinary individual with ADHD and high-masking, low-support autism, and my commitment to social justice. The intersections of my marginalized identities are foundational to my activism, rather than incidental. My neurodivergence and queerness, though often pathologized or marginalized by society, provide a unique lens through which I understand power and privilege—informing my perspectives in personal, professional, and political contexts. The documented correlation between autism and gender nonconformity (Cain & Velasco, 2021; Hillier et al., 2020; Shapira & Granek, 2019), as well as the connection between autism and heightened sensitivity toward social justice (Dempsey et al., 2020; Hu et al., 2021), underscores my experiences. Autistic individuals, myself included, often view the world through a lens of intense empathy and moral clarity, which drives a deep desire to challenge inequity (Caldwell-Harris & Schwartz, 2023).

Identifying as AUDHD (Autistic and ADHD), I have navigated the social complexities of neurodivergence, frequently perceived as "peculiar" or "weird." In many ways, I learned to embrace these expectations of peculiarity. My presentation as a White female-assigned at birth afforded me the privilege of being deemed eccentric, weird, and curious rather than being disciplined for my inability to conform to social protocol. My physical presentation ensured the palatability of my (undiagnosed) neurodivergence—allowances that were not extended to many of my Black and Brown peers. It was not until my mid-30s that I fully understood my "weirdness" as a complex intersection of neurodivergence, queerness, and social conditioning.

However, through the application of various critical theoretical frameworks, I have come to understand how these perceptions reflect normative expectations of behavior rather than inherent truths about my identity or how I experience the world. I do, however, remain perplexed by arguments that rely on circular logic—arguments that perpetuate exclusionary practices under the guise of common sense. For instance, the unchallenged belief that students without financial means should not participate in school-sponsored field trips or extracurricular activities, as if exclusion were a natural

consequence of familial "choices," reflects an oppressive construct rather than an inherent truth.

While this section of my narrative was initially intended to focus specifically on my identity as a queer individual, I find it increasingly challenging—indeed, nearly impossible—to isolate a singular aspect of my marginalization without acknowledging the privileges conferred upon me by my whiteness. These privileges have significantly influenced my experiences and shaped my recollections of them. I readily recognize the opportunities and tolerance that have been afforded to me, often despite my queer identity.

I identify as a White queer neurodivergent nonbinary individual—a descriptor that reflects the complexity of my identity. The process of naming these facets of my identity has unfolded over the past 25 years, commencing with my coming out as a lesbian in 1998 and culminating in my recognition and articulation of my nonbinary gender identity in 2023. At this juncture, I find a sense of peace in my identity while remaining open to the possibility of further evolution and embracing the ongoing journey of becoming.

My physical presentation contributes to the considerable unearned societal privilege I experience. Each day, in every interaction, I am confronted with the "choice" to either uphold the privileges that are granted to me solely on the basis of my whiteness or to intentionally position myself as an Other in relation to the exclusionary expectations and assumptions of White cisgender-heterosexual society. I am pleased to assert that, for me, this choice is straightforward. I could not and will not perpetuate assumptions of my presumed or expected heteronormativity.

At 14, I entered my home with my first girlfriend and introduced her to my family. In stark contrast to the experiences of countless queer youth who face familial rejection, my family responded with immediate acceptance. However, my familial support sat in stark contrast to the hostility I encountered from my peers upon their learning of my relationship—a hostility that manifested in the form of derogatory slurs, such as "dyke" and "homo," as well as several failed attempts from a group of older male students to "turn me straight" by way of sexual harassment and assault. After years of masking my neurodivergence to appear "normal" and as though I belonged, I once again found myself an outsider/Othered. Feelings of isolation and shame were compounded by faculty and staff who refused to intervene or offer me protection. Instead, I was frequently admonished to keep my queerness private—a directive I continued to encounter time and again throughout my educational journey.

I have faced persistent struggles in reconciling my complex identity as a queer neurodivergent educator. These internal conflicts have been shaped by metanarratives of presumed worth and hegemonic descriptors of value, which have significantly impeded my ability to validate myself within educational systems. It is in the moments of silence that I have experienced profound disintegration. My identity has been forged in the crucible of patriarchal narratives that have been elevated to the status of Truth, dictating notions of value and worthiness wherein monolithic interpretations and expectations of educators perpetuate a problematic ideal of identity that I do not embody.

Nevertheless, it is within the realm of queerness in education—often rendered undiscussable, taboo, and frequently erased—where my passions reside. Articulating the simultaneous experiences of feeling insufficient and excessively visible encapsulates the paradox I aspire to illuminate within teacher education and the experiences of educators. Institutionalized education is not structured to accommodate or address queerness; rather, it compels queer individuals to alter, conceal, or erase their identities in order to conform to prevailing narratives that promote singular identities. For me, and many other queer educators, this misalignment is a pervasive experience, necessitating the adoption of a facade that aligns with idealized and perpetuated patriarchal ideologies.

I recognize the numerous damaging instances where I distanced myself from personal inquiries into my life due to fear and shame. I recall the times I excused myself from spaces when my elementary educator colleagues discussed queer students with disdain, internalizing feelings of anger, guilt, and shame as a result of the comments made by my "well-meaning" coworkers. I recall sharing lunches with colleagues and individuals I considered friends, where our conversations ranged from weekend excursions to lesson planning. While I often ignored their insensitive and homophobic statements, the pain and anger stemming from our last lunch overshadow all other interactions. During that meal, a colleague asserted that "gay people are disgusting; they should not be allowed to work in the food service industry because they might have AIDS," while hastily clarifying that I was "okay" or palatable as a queer individual because she knew me and I was "not like the other gay people."

This awareness, while difficult to express throughout my childhood, has been crucial in shaping my activism. It has heightened my consciousness of how power operates within educational spaces and beyond, reinforcing exclusion for some while allowing conditional inclusion for others. My experiences as a queer, nonbinary, neurodivergent individual have fueled my commitment to dismantling the structural inequalities that perpetuate exclusion and marginalization, particularly in education, where the stakes are highest for those who do not conform to dominant norms.

I find great joy in my current role at the university. I am now in a program committed to social justice with colleagues who respect and support one another. Initially, I was apprehensive about the possibility of relocating to accept this position, but I moved to the South no less. I questioned how I might navigate anti-queerness in a new state, city, and school. The worry of arriving and feeling like I did not belong again was petrifying. In lieu of this concern, I promised myself that I would arrive as who I was.

Throughout the application, interview, and hiring process, I was clear about my identity, needs, and activist pedagogy. If nothing else, I would not end up employed somewhere I worried about people discovering my queerness. This pre-planning, this "work" to fully present as a queer person, is complicated because of the distinct choice I have not to. My choice to continually out myself as a queer person, an "outsider," is not only a form of survival, but it imbues my activism further, both personally and professionally. One of my mentors, Dr. Fran Huckaby, deeply inspired my tethering of pedagogy and activism. While she currently serves as an Associate Provost of Faculty Affairs, I first met Fran when applying to my doctoral program—she served as the department chair and one of two main faculty.

In contrast to the majority of my previous White male collegiate educators, whose teaching methods were characterized by hierarchical structures and rigid expectations, Dr. Huckaby's pedagogical presence stemmed from her insight, genuine warmth, and comprehensive understanding of the course materials. I prioritized enrolling in as many of her classes as possible throughout my studies. I was consistently motivated by her unique pedagogical

style, which holistically balanced high expectations with vulnerability and a willingness to engage with students where they were academically. As an activist, she embodied a pedagogy of beckoning. Dr. Huckaby actively engaged students in personal and professional growth opportunities by connecting us with various research and writing opportunities. She provided mentorship with exceptional generosity and care—expanding for me a limited understanding of the types of privileged identities and behaviors that might "succeed."

Before connecting with Fran, I attempted to go unnoticed as a queer educator. Given histories of anti-queer rhetoric and policies throughout K–12, alongside the negative and traumatic experiences I encountered in my schooling, I felt an enormous sense of gratitude for even being allowed into the field at all. However, soon into my second year of coursework, I recall having a moment of clarity that has since been the catalyst for how I choose to navigate the world. Fran's perspectives as a Black woman, educator, and activist illustrated the potential to weave activism into my educational pursuits. I had been shrinking my queerness for years in hopes of "fitting" into education. However, I was exhausted, sad, and—quite frankly—could no longer be guided by the internal shame of my queerness.

Since that moment, I have actively worked to center my queerness throughout my research endeavors. Not only does this centering serve as a beckoning of sorts to those out there seeking to engage with my scholarly pursuits, but it also centers a new self-ethics of care in which I will not shrink or disappear in hopes of surviving and finding future success. Instead, I will continue building a network of activist students, colleagues, and friends to grow alongside. Like Dr. Huckaby, I hope to foster an educational atmosphere of inclusivity and generosity, where I accompany students on their intellectual paths, steering them toward deeper critical engagement. However, the diverse array of courses I teach often places this commitment to meeting students at their current levels of understanding in tension with my values, self-assurance, and personal experiences.

As an openly queer and gender-nonconforming educator, I constantly navigate the complex intersections of course material, professional duties, self-care, and ethical obligations. I have experienced varied instances of anti-queerness in student assignment submissions—experiences that have left me feeling disheartened and personally impacted. My responsibilities as an educator compel me to guide students toward becoming more critical thinkers, proficient writers, and engaged scholars. In recognizing my ideological discomfort, however, I strive for a balance between affirming my identity and moral integrity while fulfilling my educational and activist responsibilities.

ACTIVISM IN PRACTICE

In this work, we employed our counternarratives of marginalization, fostering connections with readers and promoting enhanced collective action. These black feminist and queer acts of subversion challenge exclusionary grand narratives to expose nuances of our lived experiences as marginalized individuals. Via our counternarratives, we situate ourselves within the current iterations of our identities while simultaneously recognizing the palimpsest of exclusions upon which we sit.

Drawing on the foundational principles of critical race feminism (Berry, 2010) and reconceptualist curriculum theory (Pinar, 1978), we engage/grapple in/with complicated conversations (Pinar, 2005) and ongoing reflexivity to explore how our multifaceted identities shape our perspectives as activists, educators, and learners. Continuous reflexive practices, facilitated through counter-storytelling, illuminate our social, historical, cultural, and political identities while providing nuanced insights for potential connections and transformations of our current practices and ideologies. For instance, one approach toward EdD-activism stems from deconstructing the competitive nature of schooling and the heightened level of posturing that can inhabit doctoral programs. Convincing students there are multiple lenses through which to explore and understand phenomena (i.e., that there is no explicit right or wrong response to a problem), a first step toward creating a space for critical conversation and solutions-oriented dialogue, sometimes accounts for the tension between EdD students' teaching and learning spaces (Storey & Fletcher, 2023). More specifically, creating community through participation graded, safe group work encourages students to give and get support. In this model, students complete weekly readings in small co-op groups, so when four articles or book chapters are the assigned reading for the week, the co-op of four students reads one of the four texts for the week and they are responsible to their co-op participants for providing access to that knowledge for the week. Each student offers a detailed presentation of their assigned reading and leads a thorough discussion of the reading with the group. This model reduces the initial pressure of managing the doctoral level workload that typically overwhelms graduate students, especially working professionals in EdD programs. As students are *becoming* scholarly practitioners, the model respects students' personal and professional obligations and gives them time to build the academic stamina needed to move toward their individual research workloads. This model also creates a team mentality and increases students' trust in faculty who are *beckoning* them to embrace the tenets of EdD-activism. Lastly, the model de-emphasizes the individual and prioritizes community as the scholarly practitioner understands and accepts a sense of *belonging*. Ultimately, these experiences help students develop and navigate their own counternarratives that may emerge as incongruent with their established communities of colleagues, family, and friends (McClure, 2021). The impact of nurturing EdD-activists is not to be taken lightly, and the importance of maintaining contact with a supportive community cannot be overstated.

In sharing counternarratives, marginalized individuals assert agency over their identities and make connections across difference; empowering them to question and reshape the established order to promote broader perspectives and foster collective inclusion. As the past actively exists and continues to animate the present (Foucault, 1991), such connections render notions of palimpsests—specifically, how various, often unseen, dichotomous representations and embodiments of exclusion and inclusion remain ever present regardless of (un)intentional acknowledgments. That is to say, we can provide safe spaces for doctoral students in their university communities, but their identities as doctoral students, graduates, and scholarly practitioners may be questioned, challenged, and/or disregarded in their teaching and places of professional employment. Autonomous creation and implementation of knowledge produced on an EdD-activism platform may not be readily accepted or rewarded outside of the university—marginalizing EdD-activists in their respective communities.

Therefore, concepts and understandings of identity do not sit in isolation, but rather they sit upon prior iterations that define parameters of belonging and questions of identity which, while not readily visible, continue to "contaminate" (Tsing, 2015) and undergird hegemony of belonging. These rich and complicated historical contaminations are woven throughout and into current manifestations and understandings of our experiences, endeavors, and impacts. Recognitions of such contaminations highlight various historical threads that have been caught up and knotted together in a way that is part of the contemporary, offering opportunities to examine material dimensions that include the intermingling of unexpected collaborations and connections by constituting a continuous journey of becoming.

These encounters challenge rigid categories and stereotypes, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities within and between individuals. The breakdown of boundaries through these various encounters underscores the importance of engaging with differences to facilitate personal and collective growth. In these in-between spaces, individuals can explore the historical, social, and cultural constructions of identity as porous and unfixed rather than static and essential. While the journey through these borderlands can prove challenging, it should be taken collectively with those from dominant groups engaging in complicated conversations while examining their own identities.

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