

**“Challenging the Borders of Civic Engagement:  
Ethnic Studies and the Meaning of Community Democracy”**

**George J. Sanchez**

**Univ. of California, Irvine – February 7, 2008**

At the beginning of this decade I had the good fortune of working with one of the most committed institutions to civic engagement in the nation: the Japanese American National Museum. I was working as the Principal Investigator on a museum exhibition project that would eventually become their exhibition on the multiracial history of Boyle Heights and run for nine months at the museum in 2002-2003. As part of that exhibition, the museum would produce a guide for teachers, a video for classroom use, and would train local residents to be docents for the museum. But the event that helped me capture my own joy at civic engagement work happened years before these concluding events when we were still gathering stories, looking for former residents to interview, and generally trying to reconstruct the community that existed in Boyle Heights in the 1930s and 1940s.

This event took place at the International Institute, a social service agency on Boyle Avenue that had served immigrants to the Eastside since the beginning of the twentieth century. Because of the networks the project had already constructed, we decided to have a workshop with former residents of Boyle Heights from the community fifty years in the past, and current residents of Boyle Heights who were living there in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The two groups had not necessarily had almost any sustained contact. The 1940s group had often moved out of the community during those years, and although

absolutely committed to memories of the neighborhood and even Roosevelt High School football, many had rarely ventured back to visit the current neighborhood because it had changed so much, in their opinion. Those that currently lived in Boyle Heights often had no idea that a multiracial community had existed in the recent past of the neighborhood, and that there were others in southern California that felt that Boyle Heights was their real home. We, in effect, were trying to bridge the gulf of race, history, geography, and generations through our workshop by using the memories of the Boyle Heights community as our common ground.

I, along with curators Sojin Kim and Darcie Iki, helped prepare a group of graduate students and community researchers to lead discussions across these generations at small tables at the International Institute where we would purposely mix former and current residents together to talk about the neighborhood. I know that this meeting generated lots of future interviews and even critical primary archival sources for the museum, but I will always remember sitting down at these tables and listening to the stories and the unexpected connections that resulted. A Guatemalan immigrant who was concerned about the effect of the current Gold Line extension on his business on First Street discussed fighting City Hall with a former Jewish resident who had battled the freeways from cutting through Boyle Heights in the 1950s. At another table, two others discovered that they lived in the same house—just fifty years apart—and began to exchange stories about the surrounding neighbors and neighborhood. This was historical research, but also historical exchange between those who were living it, all brought together in a multiracial setting by a major Asian American organization and a Chicano historian.

I left Boyle Heights that day committed to creating other opportunities like I had just witnessed and finding other ways to make history literally come alive among a wider population than those that I teach at college or read my academic books. As a historian, I also became committed to unearthing the history of civic engagement by faculty over time with immigrant and racialized communities. Almost invariably, folks at the university would direct me towards John Dewey and the public engagement movement at the University of Chicago at the beginning of the twentieth century. But as I explored that history, especially that written by minority scholars such as UCLA's Henry Yu, I came to realize that my standpoint as a scholar and as a minority professional was quite different than Dewey. John Dewey believed in the power of institutions of higher learning to transform communities and of the potential of individual scholars to act as a bridge between the university and the community. In his day, "the community" often meant immigrant or African American neighborhoods, but Dewey himself had emerged from small, homogeneous rural New England town. Part of his own psychological makeup, I believe, was rooted in bringing small community sensibilities to the bewildering diversity he encountered in a growing metropolis like Chicago.

I, on the other hand, had been born in Boyle Heights, and felt like I was engaging with a community that was my own. The genealogy of my own civic engagement, like so many of you in this audience, would have to go beyond John Dewey or Robert Park to engage scholars of color who had dedicated themselves to making education work for the communities that they had come from. Just like building genealogies of scholarship that search for the roots of African American Studies, or Asian American Studies, or

Chicano/Latino Studies, I felt it imperative to look for models of scholarly behavior of civic engagement in the past with which I could connect my current work.

Of course, through much of the twentieth century, we can find minority scholars who, by virtue of their exclusion from predominantly white institutions, were always closely connected to minority communities. Many of these individuals forged careers that bridged academia through historically black colleges and the variety of needs of minority and poor communities throughout the United States. One needs to go no further than the stunning intellectual career of W.E.B. DuBois to understand how integral civic engagement has been to generations of scholars of color. His interdisciplinary writings, from the literary *Souls of Black Folk* to the social scientific *Philadelphia Negro*, to the thirteen years of Atlanta Studies, all show his commitment to scholarship that moves beyond the academy to engage the problems of specific black communities. But his career with the NAACP, as editor of the *Crisis* newspaper, also displays a willingness to be seriously involved in what was called “racial uplift” throughout his career. Indeed, recently Francille Wilson has published a book focused on the early generation of Black female and male scholars of labor of this same generation that worked between limited inclusion to academic institutions, government service, and black community institutions throughout their career.

As a historian myself, I have long adopted as one of my heroes the octagarian historian John Hope Franklin, who I first heard speak at a Ford Foundation conference in the 1980s. In that talk, he captured my attention by discussing what it was like to do research in the Jim Crow South for a black historian in segregated quarters. Indeed, many southern archives would not allow him to look at materials in their many reading

rooms, and instead cleared out a broom closet so that he would be by himself to do scholarly historical research. More recently, his autobiography, *Mirror to America*, speaks loudly about the bridge work that scholars of color have long felt compelled to do as an integral part of their scholarly careers:

From the very beginning of my own involvement in the academy, the goal I sought was to be a scholar with credentials as impeccable as I could achieve. At the same time I was determined to be as active as I could in the fight to eradicate the stain of racism that clouded American intellectual and academic life even as it poisoned other aspects of American society. Both challenges were formidable. While I set out to advance my professional career on the basis of the highest standards of scholarship, I also used that scholarship to expose the hypocrisy underlying so much of American social and race relations. It never ceased begin a risky fear of tightrope walking, but I always believed that if I could use my knowledge and training to improve society it was incumbent on me to make the attempt. Thus, in addition to teaching and writing, I served as an expert witness in cases designed to end segregation in education, most memorably at the behest of Thurgood Marshall, and I marched to Montgomery to make common cause with those who sought in other ways to destroy racial hatred and bigotry. (p. 176)

It was specifically this inspiration that led me to accept an invitation to write a legal brief last summer for a group fighting Ward Connerly's attempt to end magnet schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District because they allocated spaces in those schools at least partially on the basis of race in order to have sustainable integration in those schools. By providing a history of segregation in Los Angeles County to the courts, I played a small part in fighting back our current struggle for racial equity in education at all levels.

The explosion of Ethnic Studies on college campuses in the late 1960s and early 1970s broadened the impact of these efforts from individual scholars in various disciplines to collective groups of faculty, students, and staff who regularly saw as part of their mission a commitment to specific communities that had largely been excluded up to

that point by predominantly white institutions. Both Yen Le Espiritu and Daryl Maeda have chronicled how critical it was for the first generation of Asian American Studies activists to organize themselves, be it at San Francisco State, UC Berkeley, or UCLA, in relation to the Asian American communities directly around them. Maeda makes clear that participation in the California versions of the Black civil rights and black power movements was critical in shaping the perspective of the first Asian American Studies programs, while Espiritu chronicles how a pan-Asian perspective affected not only how Asian American Studies was organized, but had influence in organization efforts in the wider Asian American community outside of campus.

My own training in Chicano Studies has helped me put this trajectory of civic engagement over time in the field that I am most closely allied with. Early pioneers in the field, such as education scholar George I. Sanchez, folklorist Americo Paredes, and historian Carey McWilliams, all produced scholarship intended both for academia and a wider public, served in government or produced government-funded research, and took on the racism they encountered in southwestern communities and in academia. As Chicano students organized in the late 1960s under MEChA and other student organizations, they made explicit the role they hoped academia would play in the betterment of their communities through *El Plan de Santa Barbara*, one of the founding documents of the Chicano Movement:

The colleges and universities in the past have existed in an aura of omnipotence and infallibility. It is time that they be made responsible and responsive to the communities in which they are located or whose members they serve. (El Plan de Santa Barbara, 1968; reproduced in Carlos Munoz, *The Chicano Movement*, p. 201)

Many of the scholars I respect most among my ethnic studies peers have established careers of meaningful public scholarship and commitment to civic engagement in their work with teachers, museums, labor organizations, and other civic activity. On this campus, Vicki Ruiz' longtime engagement with communities of color, her accessible and pathbreaking scholarship, and her engagement with local communities and teachers at each institution she has been with have been an inspiration to me. The muralist Judy Baca has not only produced community-based art for her entire career but also bridged academia and artistic production by pioneering new techniques of mural production and archiving electronic versions of her own and other artists work that will be available for generations. The Wall of Los Angeles in the San Fernando Valley does one of the most effective jobs of chronicling local and Chicano history in the public sphere that I have ever encountered. I could go on with many more examples, but suffice to say that the community of Ethnic Studies scholars has long produced individuals more committed to civic engagement than any other collection of university scholars and teachers.

Unfortunately, much of the growing civic engagement community in the country is unaware of this history and often acts as if engagement with minority communities is a new phenomenon led by sympathetic white professors and traditional disciplines. It is imperative, I believe that we seriously engage with one of the most important and growing commitments of universities at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> to civic engagement with communities both near and far from the campus. Across the country, university presidents and chancellors have taken up the 1994 call of Ernest Boyer for creating a new American college committed to improving the conditions

of its own immediate surroundings. The Campus Compact, a group of university presidents committed to the growth of service-learning communities bringing students and community residents together, has grown from 13 members in 1985 to over one thousand member institutions in the past year. My own institution, the University of Southern California, won Time Magazine's coveted College of the Year Award in 2000 because of the many partnerships it has forged between the university and community groups in the area immediately surrounding the university. USC's honor is telling, given that it reflects a reversal of a trend dating from the 1965 Watts Riots to close itself off from the surrounding neighborhood. Currently more than 60 percent of our students volunteer at some point in their undergraduate careers in university-sponsored programs with our neighbors, and each year some 3000 undergraduates participate in service-learning courses, receiving academic credit for community involvement and reflective academic work.

The reasons universities have moved increasingly in these directions are varied and complex. USC and other urban universities and colleges like NYU, University of Pennsylvania, Yale, Columbia, Trinity College, and University of Chicago do much of this work through a motivation of what has been coined "enlightened self-interest" to enhance the surrounding neighborhood in order to counteract what was seen as a declining reputation due to location in a run-down "ghetto" community. In California, many elite institutions are involved in this work at least partly because it is difficult to approach the current state legislature, which is much more diverse than the University of California faculty as a whole, for more monies without a track record of impact in local communities. In Midwestern large public universities, these efforts are often put in the



rubric of a continuation of the purpose of land grant universities, intended to serve the rural, now often urban, poor to prosper. Religious institutions, such as Jesuit universities such as Santa Clara University or University of San Diego, often see this work as an outgrowth of religious duty to work towards social justice. And small liberal arts colleges often attempt to work against the parochial backgrounds of many of their students and use this work to introduce them to a more class-stratified and globalized world in which they will enter upon graduation.

Taken altogether, both the rhetoric and the reality of “civic engagement” are likely to remain with us in university settings throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yet the ultimate irony is, of course, that most of the communities that our universities work in are racialized ones, usually quite close to campuses such as those around USC and NYU. I would argue that UCI’s engagement with Santa Ana is a critical one in the future of the diverse Orange County population and could be a model for serious civic engagement nationwide. Even while our campuses seem to be pulling back from commitments to on-campus diversity and access to all populations, they also seem to be moving decidedly into a posture of promoting “civic democracy” in the very communities they are less likely to take undergraduates, and certainly new faculty, from. What happens, then, when the rhetoric of civic engagement smacks into the realities of the current and growing limitations of access and fundamental retreat from concepts of inclusiveness? Does this gap between rhetoric and reality provide a new window of opportunity for Ethnic Studies Departments and Programs to display the efficacy of their research, teaching, and commitment to diverse communities in surrounding populations? Does it create a new

opportunity for us to base our commitments to access for people of color to higher education in the very core of the self-interest of our universities?

While my answer to these questions is a decided and emphatic YES, many of you might wonder why, given the long history of Ethnic Studies in community involvement and civic engagement, we should be forced to reach out to those newcomers now trying to work with racialized communities for the first time. Over time, I would argue however, most Ethnic Studies programs have drifted away from some of these earlier commitments, and Ethnic Studies as a whole as it has become more embedded in the university community and politics, and while its practitioners have garnered scholarly and professional praise, the connections to specific communities have become rather frayed and inconsistent. And while individual faculty and specific programs continue to work tirelessly in various communities, the Ethnic Studies movement as a whole would need to renew its commitment for a new era to become full players in this 21<sup>st</sup> century movement towards civic engagement.

At USC, many individual faculty members have long track records of community work and social justice activism that should make them spokespeople for university civic engagement. Ruthie Gilmore, author of the recently published Golden Gulag which chronicles the rise of the prison-industrial complex in California, has been an activist on prison issues throughout the state for longer than she has been a professor. Laura Pulido has been an active member of the urban environmentalism movement, an active supporter of the community-based Southern California Library for Social Studies Research in south central Los Angeles. One of her classes produced a GIS-map of great use by social justice groups of local community struggles against the local land practices of USC, one

of the regions' most extensive landowners and L.A. County's largest private employer. Two of our political scientists, Ricardo Ramirez and Janelle Wong, work regularly with the National Association of Latino Elected Officials and the Asian American/Pacific Islander Resource Center to study, support, and engage the process of citizenship formation and electoral voting with teams of students. Psychologist Stan Huey works with African American and Latino families struggling with gang violence, while sociologist Macarena Gomez-Barris connects with local activists in Chile searching for ways to remember those who lost their lives under the dictatorship of Pinochet. My colleague economist Manuel Pastor has worked to bring social equity issues to the forefront in both Los Angeles and Latin America, and cultural studies scholar Josh Kun has had his own program on alternative Latino music on Los Angeles radio and currently heads a new center of music bridging the academic and the popular. Our newest colleague, Robin D.G. Kelley, has through his various writings and public role with a host of progressive organizations, exemplified the engaged leftist intellectual. I regularly use "Freedom Dreams" myself with community organizations to discuss the realm of "the possible"—most recently in dialogue with community organizations coping with Katrina in New Orleans. I am sure that each of your campuses could tell similar stories of civic engagement and longtime commitment to community justice work among your faculty and many of your students.

Yet, the civic engagement work of our universities often ignores this vital connection and commitment to racialized communities, and instead often engages in what Pablo Freire long ago called "false charity"—acts of service that simply perpetuate the status quo and thus preserve the need for service. In 1970, Freire wrote:

In order to have the continued opportunity to express their “generosity,” the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this “generosity”. . . True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the “rejects of life,” to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving so that these hands . . . need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which . . . transform the world. (Pablo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1997; originally published in 1970), pp. 26-27.)

One of the most important roles of Ethnic Studies in the civic engagement movement is to critique this “false charity” and push university conversations and engagement forward towards community empowerment, not simply using the community to test theory or as raw data for studies. Moreover, we need to push student-learning activities in the community towards a pedagogy of empowerment and serious discussions of social justice commitment alongside the tutoring or volunteerism—what some have called “charity work.” Jazz studies students at USC’s Thornton School of Music stepped in to offer private and group music lessons when funding cutbacks of K-12 public school forced LA Unified school administrators to eliminate music from school budgets, yet a wider conversation about transforming public education and providing adequate funding must be on everyone’s agenda. When public school students face a student-counselor ratio in Los Angeles County that can be as high as one thousand to one, it is important but not enough for students from the USC Rossier School of Education to provide some college and financial aid counseling. Ethnic Studies programs should be at the forefront of connecting civic engagement experience, social and cultural analysis, and the search for theoretical and practical experiments, and eventual solutions.

Yet, we continue to live in an environment where participation of faculty in civic engagement work is sometimes valued unequally and racialized. I have often heard of situations, and sometimes experienced situations, in which the wider participation of white faculty members in civic engagement or university-wide commitments is valued and rewarded, while similar activity by minority faculty members is naturalized, undervalued, and sometimes punished in evaluation processes. What I believe is at work here is assumptions about the “extra effort” and “noble charity” that it takes for white scholars to be involved in activities that serve a wider public, while assuming that activity by a minority scholar in similar pursuits is simply a natural function of their background or a misguided and personalized attempt to seek outside recognition away from the scholarly community. Sometimes activity in a minority community is not seen as “serving the wider public,” while activity by a white faculty member in the same community is identified as “breaking the boundaries” of the university with the community. The borders of both “Town and Gown,” therefore, are racialized, and minority faculty members and their activities simply don’t fit assumptions regarding civic engagement. In addition, the place of public scholarship such as widely read books, op-ed pieces, and media activity get undervalued if it is presented in minority newspapers, Spanish-language media, or public readings in minority communities, as opposed to the New York or Los Angeles Times and white suburban outposts of culture. This situation reflects, in short, the inability of some chairs and deans to see beyond their own racial condition and truly understand and reward efforts by faculty members of all backgrounds towards service to community and to the university.

As colleges and universities make more institutional commitments to civic and community engagement, it is critical that they discuss the changing nature of the “American public” and the challenges of the growing racial and ethnic diversity and divide that exists between university faculty and the community at their doors. Minority faculty members often enter this discussion with unique contributions to make in these efforts, but ones that sometimes challenge the underlying assumptions that universities have made towards these efforts. It is the responsibility of each and every scholar interested in a diverse and inclusive intellectual community to unmask these assumptions and widen the meaning of civic and public engagement to include and embrace the activities of minority faculty members and communities of color in our meaning of “the public.”

I know this is a tall order to fulfill, particularly when the work we do is under assault from the right and from within the university itself. Moreover, the “public” we need to serve is growing exponentially, when over one-third of the current U.S. population is of color, and demographic projections show that close to one-half of the total U.S. population will be African American, Latino, Native American, Asian American, or racially mixed by the time affirmative action is officially dead at mid-century. And one startling fact confronts any faculty member interested in working in the wider public in the United States: seven out of the ten largest cities in the United States have majorities of African American and Latino populations, while 35 of the largest 50 metropolitan areas in the U.S. have majority African-American and Latino populations. Coupled with expanding poverty in many of these communities, the need is great and our ranks are still too small.

In fact, I have been arguing for many years that the civic engagement movement allows us to refashion our arguments about the necessity of a diverse faculty and student body for our communities away from legalistic arguments and back towards issues of pedagogy and community outreach and support for higher education. Whatever affirmative action is in the future, it is clear to me that we have lost the backing of the courts and the voting public towards the kind of legal and moral rationale that has undergirded most affirmative action programs in the past. More recently, several of the national foundations that have supported targeted minority fellowships have recently been forced to change their criteria for selection to include “commitment and action towards promoting diversity in higher education,” rather than simply minority status. This means that it is now an expectation for Ford and Mellon diversity fellowship winners to participate in wider service to increasing pipelines of diverse students, including K-12 education efforts. This shift in public opinion and private practices means that to move forward a discussion of racial equity in higher education requires new strategies and alliances in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Yet, I am sure that our campus communities of scholars and teachers, students and staff, are up to the challenge, and indeed, will increasingly be called upon to play this role as the disparity between community and campus becomes more and more obvious. And I believe that we should take stock of our current and future strengths to play a critical role in civic engagement. American Studies and Ethnic Studies programs and departments like the ones at USC and UCI are interdisciplinary across the humanities and social sciences, and house scholars who focus on race and ethnicity across a wide range of minority groups in the United States and abroad. Collectively, these strengths give us

a certain intellectual power to engage with diversified communities facing a host of difficult and complex social and cultural issues now and in the future.

At USC, I have been given some support to establish a new Center for Diversity and Democracy to begin the process of advancing our knowledge and commitment in these areas. Because of our particular strengths, we have collectively decided to take on the issues concerning Black-Brown tensions and areas of cooperation in a multi-year project that will have regional, national and international dimensions.

Reports of rising tensions across the country between African Americans and Latinos have generated calls for peace, unity and a new recognition of realities that shake the foundations of traditional depictions of racial strife in the U.S. In December 2006, in the neglected Harbor Gateway area of the city of Los Angeles, a 14-year-old African American girl was brutally murdered by what authorities called a racially motivated hate crime carried out by Latino teenagers who were members of a local Latino gang. In response, members of both racial groups march singing “We Shall Overcome,” while a Latina law professor writes an editorial blaming the violence on the historic racism against African peoples from the cultures of Latin America that in the U.S. translates into “Latino ethnic cleansing of African Americans from multiracial neighborhoods.” We know of other newfound sources of racial tension, and also instances of cooperation, across the U.S. South, Midwest, and the Eastern seaboard.

These reports and this demographic reality has prompted us at USC to launch a “Black-Brown” Initiative that takes advantage of our own racial diversity as a community, our new faculty and graduate student interests, and our commitment to racial equity. While we encourage other campuses to find their own particular strengths and



challenges and move forward, unafraid to take on difficult issues facing our communities, I would like to find university partners to join us in this particular quest for new answers, new theories to understand and interpret these challenges. We will partner with Emory University for a year to investigating these issues in the U.S. South, and with NYU when we investigate these issues in the New York metropolitan region.

Moreover, I think all of our Ph.D. programs must do a better job of preparing graduate students for a career dedicated to civic engagement work as academics. To achieve balance as a professor committed to serious community engagement and social justice work is not easy, yet we have many examples of faculty who are doing this balancing act every day of their professional lives. We need to find more effective ways of conveying this knowledge and experience to newcomers in our profession, while pushing the academic profession as a whole to incorporate this work into more than token efforts during promotion cases, especially if our universities are increasingly dependent on this work. One national organization I am involved in that has taken up this challenge is “Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life,” a consortium that was housed at the University of Michigan, but moved last fall to Syracuse University. They encourage serious community partnerships in the arts, humanities and design, and are currently working with various university presidents to incorporate the evaluation of this work into tenure decisions. Indeed, this coming fall, from October 2-4, 2008, my Center at USC is bringing their national conference to Los Angeles, and I am currently working with a program committee to plan that conference on civic engagement. I invite you to participate and to submit proposals for panels to be included in the conference. I have

brought materials from Imagining America here so you might explore the possibility of involvement.

At USC, Imagining America has inspired me to work with others to create a Graduate Certificate in Civic Engagement that will help Ph.D. students prepare for these future careers as scholars engaged with local communities. I hope this will help us in the future convince more quality undergraduates from racial minority communities to see the professoriate as a pathway for serious scholarship and civic work to advance social justice in this country for all.

I also want to put out a personal message to any of you who are Ph.D. students in the audience or undergraduates thinking about becoming future faculty. Many students of color I have worked worry mightily that their intended academic careers and resulting professionalization will drive them away from our communities of origin, despite their best intentions, and throughout graduate school and beyond they want to find a way to stay connected through activism and activity off or on-campus. Often we think about this as the “real world,” the place where most in our communities actually reside, versus the life that few of us—the elite really—live that can afford the luxury of graduate education, university environments, and intellectual conversation. Even those of us who are committed to academic careers have this gnawing feeling of insecurity, always wondering if what we do matters in the wider world, whether it brings about social justice and economic equity, or whether we are kidding ourselves into thinking that writing a book only few will read or teaching a class of privileged students actually will make a difference in the larger scheme of things.

This feeling of insecurity is based on a real substantive critique of academic institutions as producing research that either is irrelevant to solving real world problems or actually goes to support the status quo of racial disparities and economic oppression. But is also often leads us away from our own academic goals, as we spend more and more time leading campus organizations or working in the community than doing the academic research and writing, not to mention the intellectual thinking, that will propel our academic success. There are few graduate students of color that I know who are committed to social justice that have not felt these feelings, and these feelings don't necessarily go away when one becomes a tenured faculty member.

While this issue involves a complex set of circumstances and often contradictory desires, I want to start by acknowledging that much of this sentiment comes from feeling alienated by the very academic environments we have decided to be involved in to reach our professional goals. Rather than running from these environments, we should start by acknowledging that many of us need, sometimes desperately need, to continue or begin engagement with "the community" just to make it through our intellectual and personal demanding academic environments. This is not to say that our altruistic desires are always selfish, but that we often fail to admit to the fact that these connections can, indeed, help us emotionally and intellectually to achieve our own goals—if, and this is a big "if," kept in moderation and balance with why we are pursuing our degrees to begin with. My main academic advisor in graduate school, blessed man that he is, always warned me against involvement with minority undergraduates and the community. And I would nod my head, then ignore his advice, partly because I felt like I was drowning emotionally in the overwhelmingly white environment that was my department culture.

But I also heeded the worst scenarios he accurately painted by balancing this involvement with attention to my academic work, and prioritizing it when it mattered.

As I have obtained academic employment, this tug of the community has not subsided. Indeed, one week after I turned in my final dissertation copy in 1989, I was recruited by an organization of national faculty desperate for minority faculty members to help train a new generation of secondary school teachers interested in incorporating the insights of minority scholarship into the high school curriculum. My teaching with that group actually help me become a better university instructor, something that was not a great part of my graduate education. I continued to benefit through that involvement, while also helping high school teachers, and hopefully their students, learn more about new scholarship on race and ethnicity that could be integrated into high school history and literature classes. But I also realized that the high school teachers only took me seriously because I was a university faculty member, credentialed to teach what I knew.

Indeed, if you ask most activists involved in community work, including some of my closest friends, they will tell you that they need our expertise and our own legitimization as university faculty in order to accomplish their goals as community activists in grassroots organizations. Almost all activist positions do not require a Ph.D. for entry nor success; indeed, my friends would be offended to think that my advanced education makes me any more qualified to do what they do than they. Instead, they know they NEED me to speak in front of city councils, on national boards, as advisors on immigration policy, etc., BECAUSE of my credentialed expertise, my university position, and my ability and desire to speak to a wider public and policy audience. I work closely, for example, with many ethnic museums in Los Angeles and nationwide,

partly because I am committed to translating our scholarship in ethnic studies to a wider audience. But the curators that I work with will also remind me that they are the experts on translation, the lead organizers of that, if you will, while I am simply an academic advisor and consultant.

Our advanced degree and more importantly, our growing intellectual expertise combined with commitment to the community, is a powerful ally to community activists in much of their work. And some of us will be better suited for this work than others. But if you want to be a community activist full-time, then you should do it now and leave academia, since it does not require a Ph.D. or other advanced degree to perform. On the other hand, I have found that I have achieved a level of expertise and experience that makes me immensely valuable to community organizations whose work I admire and respect. And particularly after tenure, my academic freedom allows me to do this important work and incorporate it into my “work time” as a public intellectual.

What our communities need, more than anything else, is for each of you to complete your academic degrees in the most efficient and effective ways possible, producing high quality scholarship that will transform the way that your disciplines think about the subjects you write and publish about. If you do that, not only will you find academic employment, or professional jobs where you have clout, but also you will reach tenure and job security more quickly, making you more available to control your time and give as much of it as you desire to affect change on our campuses and in our communities. Our various communities are not dumb; they want quality and expertise in the same way that other communities want it among the professionals in their midst. They want teachers that inspire academic achievement among the young, role models to

look up to, and individuals who will lend a helping hand when needed, keeping their doors behind them open to newcomers of all races. They want us to achieve, but they do not want us to forget.

As American Studies and Ethnic Studies programs and departments re-engage with communities, there are a number of insights from our scholarship over the past forty years that should inform our practice:

1) **There is no need to romanticize our communities.** While some who are involved in civic engagement juxtapose an all-positive “community” versus a wholly negative “campus,” Ethnic Studies scholars have always realized that our communities contain both good and bad. What racialized community activists need are serious, committed partnerships, not overblown rhetoric.

2) **Avoid homogenizing our communities.** We need to continue to engage our communities in all their diversity and complexity, and not be afraid to take on differences. If our scholarship has shown us anything, it is that diversity of gender, sexuality, class, age, and background enhance the strengths of our peoples, but also can reflect real differences which must be considered in all aspects of civic engagement.

3) **Sustaining long-term partnerships is critical.** To effect real change in our communities, we must be willing to work with partner organizations and/or individuals over the long term, not just until the book or article is finished. While students may only be there for a short time, our departments and programs must be willing to build trust over many years and help initiate a sustained engagement that makes a difference.

4) **To take on difficult issues, be willing to teach and learn.** Most of our communities’ most difficult issues have no easy solutions. Tackling inter-racial tensions,

for example, requires listening to various legitimate grievances, identifying conditions that bring people together and drive them apart, and searching for appropriate responses while mobilizing for sustained transformation.

**5) Think through your own particular contributions to civic engagement.** As scholars and teachers, we have something unique to bring to civic engagement work. If all we bring are the skills of community organizers, then we should be community organizers. But academics, with all our skill sets, can offer unique contributions in community settings that will be appreciated by most.

I believe that this is our challenge for the 21<sup>st</sup> century—to make the institutions we work in more reflective of the desires for improvement and equity in society as a whole and more committed to relevant research and teaching. In that work, our communities are behind us one hundred percent. And I also believe that our colleges and universities will increasingly depend on us to provide guidance in that work, to make universities once again respected in the wider society for what they provide in basic research, fundamental instruction, and higher aspirations for all. I wish you well in this journey, with much success in your future, a future where more and more of us will find a joyful home. I hope my comments this afternoon have helped the ongoing conversations happening today and I encourage you to engage with me about what I have said. Thank you again for your attention and I welcome your questions and comments.

