

Untempered Generosity: Scholar-Activism from the Heart

Jennifer Richter

School for the Future of Innovation in Society and School of Social Transformation, Arizona State University

Kimberly Eversman

State of Minnesota

Denisse Roca-Servat

School of Social Sciences, Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana

Abstract

In this first essay, the authors draw upon collaborative autoethnographic work they have done together to understand how their experiences as graduate students have transformed them as people and scholars. In particular, they focus on the experiences and processes of belonging to a student-led activist organization, Local to Global Justice, within the wider climate of neoliberalism. Each discuss how the connections they made and the lessons they learned from each other, have shaped their praxis over diverging paths.

Key Terms: Higher education, scholar-activism, collaborative autoethnography



Illustration by Catalina Duque, a.k.a. Bruma Analitik

The spirit of generosity is incalculable. It stands in direct opposition to the neoliberal values that are increasingly shaping educational practices in the United States, from early education to higher education (HE) institutions. Neoliberal values stress the reduction of

students to consumers, while teachers, professors, and administrators are easily replaceable cogs (Niemann et al., 2020). Efficiency, easily quantifiable metrics, and profit drive the neoliberal turn (Giroux, 2002). But the continuing generosity of spirit, time, and care challenge and oppose the neoliberal turn in academia, and continue to demonstrate how HE is not a business to be run, but rather a place to nurture the search for liberation through knowledge, as well as the liberation of those who are committed to these institutions. No one exemplifies the positive effects and legacies of generosity better than Dr. Beth Blue Swadener.

Beth is a role model who has mentored so many in her illustrious career, especially for those of us involved with Local to Global Justice (LTGJ), a scholar-activist organization that Beth co-founded in 2001. In another article we recently co-authored with Beth (i.e., Richter et al., 2020), we used a collaborative autoethnography (CAE) method to interrogate the role of scholar-activism and intersectionality in our HE experiences as graduate students and professors. It was a highly formal academic article that went through many revisions in order to fashion it into an acceptable format for publication. We are proud of this effort. The CAE method brought us closer together as we shared and discussed our responses to prompts we had collectively created, in an article written in one voice. We shared our fears, our struggles in academia, and our hopes for a more inclusive and just educational system.

Beth's approach to scholarship is mirrored in her approach to mentoring students, both inside and outside of activist organizations like LTGJ. Her praxis of care is deeply rooted in bridging the often abstract work of academics with the conditions of the communities that might benefit the most from more engagement with HE. As Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) notes, "relations of thinking and knowing require care and affect how we care" (p. 69). This care requires more than research and contemplation. It requires reaching out to those who may need help, whether they are graduate students, new faculty, or children in Kenya (where Beth co-founded a non-profit, the Jirani Project, as an extension of her work with street children in Nairobi, and more recently co-founded another non-profit, Friends of the Girl Child Network, to support the work of a Kenyan non-profit called the Girl Child Network, which is committed to gender justice in education, health, and other sectors). As de la Bellacasa (2017) further explains, care goes beyond an ethical obligation or personal reward. Beth exemplifies the core of care, which is "a manifold range of *doings* needed to create, hold together, and sustain life and continue its diverseness" (p. 70). Beth's ethos of care is rooted in her sense of how the world ought to be as equitable and just as possible, and her attention to her students and colleagues reflects this deep-seated ethos. Her generosity stems from this core value, and is reflected in her practices, many of which we have benefited from and continue to practice as well.

Collaborative Autoethnography as Method: A Celebration of Generosity

We return to this CAE method to share something different: our hope, our joy, and our deep affection for one another and for LTGJ, which is anchored by Beth's spirit of generosity. A CAE method requires vulnerability from participants and trust in one another, as well as a sense of community (Chang et al., 2013). Creating common prompts that are individually answered and then refashioned into a collective voice was a difficult process. But because of Beth's guidance and her incredible depth of experience in collaborations, sharing and reflecting on our experiences in HE was the most rewarding part of that exercise.

CAE is a method that has been championed by Beth (Burdell & Swadener, 1999). It is collaborative, critical, and examines the ways personal narratives reflect broader social issues. Engaging in this method, in its truest sense, means exploring and sharing personal experience which requires openness, vulnerability, and trust in one's collaborators. In our

article, “Tempered Radicalism in the Academy: Scholar-Activism in the Neoliberal University” (Richter et al., 2020), we shared our personal stories, reflected on them collectively, and then wrote about them using one voice. In “Tempered Radicalism,” we shared “stories of alienation and support that indicate larger patterns of unacknowledged structural oppressions,” using a lens of intersectionality (Richter et al., 2020). Collectively, we found that scholar-activism, especially with regard to our relation to one another and the university, was indelibly shaped by our experiences as leaders of LTGJ.

In this essay we explore the legacy of generosity Beth has left in each of our souls and hearts, nurturing our care for our students, our communities, for each other, and for ourselves. Beth's approach to HE is an intervention of generosity into the neoliberal academy that makes it too “expensive” to care about students. We welcomed the opportunity to collectively reflect on and articulate how we individually and collectively *pay it forward* in ways that the academy systemically overlooks and ignores. For this CAE-inspired exercise, we posed questions as a means of exploring what Beth's generosity of spirit, heart, time, and care mean to us, both in the past and the future. We then shared our reflections, contextualized by the ways our experiences with Beth's mentorship have allowed us to find supportive “homespaces” (hooks, 1990) where our full sense of selves, rather than just the role of researcher, could be expressed. These spaces are critically important in challenging and attenuating the strong pull of neoliberalism in HE spaces, which continue to promote the colonization of the university and the mind.

Lessons From Beth

The first question we asked ourselves was “What are some of the most important lessons you've learned from Beth?” After answering this question independently, we found that collectively, we were deeply affected by Beth's influence and approach to mentorship and activism. For Jen, Beth exemplifies empathy, compassion, and inclusion in the communities she is part of, which was especially important for a new and initially non-tenure track professor. For Kimberly, Beth gave her the gift of emotional and material support for her academic and personal life, so she was able to raise children while pursuing a PhD. For Denisse, Beth modeled the praxis of convivial learning, blending activism and scholarship that recognized the importance of local knowledge and expertise, and always approached others with respect and humility.

Jen's Lessons

Fresh out of graduate school, Jen joined Arizona State University (ASU) as a visiting assistant professor in 2013, taking a half-time appointment in Justice and Social Inquiry, a unit in the School of Social Transformation, as well as an appointment in the Consortium for Science, Policy, and Outcomes. “I floundered at first,” said Jen, “as ASU is such a large university, and just trying to understand what disciplines were in these strangely-titled schools was dizzying and disorienting.” Then a colleague told her about a group called Local to Global Justice, which met on Saturdays off-campus:

I attended a meeting, hoping to find a community on campus that was active in the social justice issues I was teaching and researching and discovered a wonderful organization that was directly connecting students to community needs. Beth's energy and dedication was evident in that first meeting in a noisy restaurant, with her bright red hair a focal point for our group's attention. Even in that initial meeting for me, I was struck by her ability to facilitate the group so that everyone got a chance to speak, and the planning was done by students and community members.

As someone just a couple of years out of grad school, I still saw professors as authority figures, even as a new professor myself. It was my first lesson in the praxis of justice, and introduction to Freire’s ideals. As co-director of L2GJ with Beth, it has been a joy to have a space away from the neoliberal pressures of the academy and be part of a space that is truly non-hierarchical and where all are welcome.

Kim’s Lessons

For Kim, Beth was a singular source of support through her PhD, especially when she started a family. When other professors refused to support her, Beth saw the whole life—not just the academic life—Kimberly lived, including her grief and hope. Beth understood the importance of family to Kim, and became a member of it. As Kim recalls:

When I shared that I was pregnant, other professors made me feel like I was never going to live up to my potential now, but Beth showed me just how powerful I was. I knew I could finish my dissertation and start my academic career and be a mom and wife all at the same time, because of her example and support.

When my mother died unexpectedly, I remember getting a call from Beth that evening. She was weeping, and when I heard how her heart was breaking for me, I remember feeling so loved and supported. When I returned to Phoenix after my mom’s funeral, Beth had organized a whole schedule of meals for Jason and me. She had rallied my village to come and wrap my family and me in such loving support. She checked in on me regularly and made me promise to give myself time to grieve before diving back into work.

This legacy of support and care was a consistent source of support for Kim’s growing family, and her need to juggle research and new family obligations:

A few months later, when my first child, Moira, was born, Beth supported me bringing her to work with me. I had a Pack ‘n Play all set up in my office so that I could work while Moira napped. Moira snuggled with me while I wrote, and she became an honorary member of the dissertation writing support group.

For Kim, Beth’s ethos of care encompassed her whole family, as well as her identity as a student.

Denisse’s Lessons

Denisse’s situation as an international doctoral student also shaped her experience in a neoliberal university, where she was told to *focus thoroughly on “academic” tasks, such as reading, studying, and writing, to maintain a high academic record*. She was frequently told *you have to be thankful for the opportunity of studying in the U.S. under a graduate fellowship and behave accordingly to the norm*.

Nevertheless, Denisse could not grapple with the idea of separating the production of knowledge with political activism and social practice. Nor could she disassociate high quality scholarship with a lack of care about pedagogy and human dignity. The tension Denisse felt is connected to larger discussions of “rigor” in academic research, and the gate-keeping that accompanies a commitment to researcher objectivity (Supiano, 2022). Meeting Beth became a moment of intervention for Denisse:

I remember coinciding with Beth at a Women in Black protest, as she was part of the peace movement against the war in Iraq, and constantly opposing any form of injustice, militarism, and violence. I knew she was a professor of the Mary Lou Fulton Institute and Graduate School of Education, and faculty co-advisor of the organization Local to Global Justice.

As part of her generation, Beth understood the importance of mobilizing for peace and justice. Labor, migrant, environmental, and basic human rights issues were always on the back of her mind, rallying for decent wages for the most vulnerable, such as custodians, janitors, undocumented workers, indigenous peoples, as well instructors and junior professors.

For Denisse, Beth exercised her influence as a tenured professor in a unique way. She led through example, promoting a more horizontal learning space based on respect for one another and building relationships of trust and solidarity.

Beth showed Denisse “that one could combine without losing excellence, credibility and substance, activism with theoretical production, as well as caring pedagogical practices with high academic standards.” Denisse often thought this was impossible, or more precisely, she was made to think it was infeasible and futile. But Beth’s practice illustrates a pedagogical and research approach that values knowledge constructed historically by communities, corporal experiences, and sociomaterial collectives otherwise considered “marginal” or “non-existent” or “not-human” by mainstream scientific standards.

These stories reflect how Beth’s very being is antithetical to the neoliberal reductionism of HE and a business model that is meant to make profits, treating students as consumers while simultaneously supporting hierarchies of knowledge and experience that limit the scope of and recognition of powerful work by scholar-activists. Beth exemplifies Gustavo Esteva’s (2012) call for “new epistemic [knowledge] spaces, inaccessible to conventional science (para. 7),” and instead proposes a space for convivial learning where the focus is on community rather than on an individual—one that embraces knowledge production from a variety of methods and cosmologies (Callahan, 2012). In the next section we discuss the impact of Beth’s model of convivial learning through writing groups and homespaces of scholar-activism.

“Normative Beth”

In this second section we asked ourselves, “What is a normative Beth moment for you?” The stories below underscore Beth’s praxis of feminist methodologies that privilege the creation of kinship and companionship (Haraway, 1997; Harding, 2008), including multispecies connections and considerations across time and space. Her feminist praxis asks us to pay attention to horizontal and collaborative power, which is reflected in her mentorship that recognizes the holistic nature of our approaches to research, teaching, mentoring, and administration (Swadener et al., 2015).

While these are traditionally divided categories in academia (and, in the case of mentoring, rarely recognized), Beth’s idea of familial relations in terms of community organizing and activism necessarily blend these categories. She embraces (big, far-flung, and messy!) families, and this approach has been liberatory for those of us who feel oppressed by the supposed division of these categories and academia from our personal lives. For many of us, the personal can never be separated from the political, and Beth’s appreciation of this has allowed for us to find a supportive space and community for flourishing.

Kim's Moments

For Kim, Beth's support of her family extended to the family of scholar-activists at ASU in LTGJ. Kimberly recalls her first encounter as an emblematic one:

It was a fall day in 2009. I had just moved to Tempe to begin my graduate studies. I was looking for ways to meet people and had gotten an email with information about a group of ASU students who gathered as a group called Local to Global Justice. The name of the group caught my attention. I had, after all, come to ASU in order to study education policy and find ways to fight for more equitable learning spaces for all children. This seemed like a group of folks who could teach me a few things.

I nervously entered the coffee shop and looked for a large group of people. I awkwardly sat down at a long table and began to introduce myself to those around me. That is where I met Beth Swadener. We began to talk and I soon discovered a kindred spirit. It was as if I had known her my entire life. We bonded over our Midwestern roots. When I told her about my previous mentor, she smiled and told me that she had known her and had worked with her at Kent State [University]. I had one of those moments of clarity, where I was suddenly sure I was exactly where I was supposed to be, with exactly the people I was meant to be with.

As time passed, Kim repeatedly witnessed Beth's generosity. Each meeting of LTGJ meant one could find a heaping bowl of Beth's guacamole and pieces of dark chocolate scattered across the table. But she also remembers that:

Beth fed me with more than food. When she found out I hadn't been offered any type of work from my advisor, she promptly saw to it that I had a job working on a large project with her. When her project ended, she connected me to others so I wouldn't be without work. She saw things in me that I couldn't yet see in myself. She became so much more than a professor or faculty advisor. She became a friend and confidant.

When I met my spouse, she was one of the first people I wanted him to meet. When I was laboring with my first child, she was excitedly keeping track of my child's arrival while at a conference, and cheered loudly, I am told, when the news came that Moira had entered the world. When my mother passed away, she wept with me and held space for me to grieve. And when the day came for me to defend my dissertation, she was there as not only my chair, my champion, but also as family as well.

Jen's Moments

Jen's experience echoes Kim's, especially in the way that Beth's concept of family is an aspect of her generosity. In fact, the two are inseparable: to be a part of Beth's family is to be a recipient of her kindness and generosity. Jen recalls:

After I had my son in 2018, Beth was one of the first people to visit me, bringing lots of food, gifts, and most importantly, good cheer. Her advice on how to manage the work-life balance that seems impossible

for women in academia has been invaluable, especially during the pandemic. She was my lifeline and my sanity check. Her honesty with her own experiences with family in the academy made me feel so much less isolated and I didn't feel like I was struggling alone.

Beth's concept of family is all-encompassing, foundationally grounded in her ideals that we should be forgiving and kind, but also stand up for one another. This idealism motivates and permeates Jen's research, teaching, mentoring, and service roles today, as she attempts to model how Beth's scholarship integrates all of these roles through an ethos of generosity to the whole person, their circumstances, and their goals.

Denisse's Moments

Denisse remembers being amazed by Beth's generous and devoted mentorship not only with students from the United States, but, more importantly, with a large number of international students who came from all over the world, such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Denisse notes: "I particularly recall the many different students Beth mentored from Kenya, a place to which Beth had devoted much time, care, and meaningful collaborations trying to uphold local values, knowledge, and culture regarding childhood education and well-being." Early on, Beth understood the decolonial practice to deconstruct the "imperial gaze" personified by the United States and American international policies around the world. This meant confronting the authoritative power of science, as well as that of capitalism and patriarchy, which frequently erase and disqualify local knowledge, particularly that of women and children.

Denisse cannot forget a dissertation defense by a well-known local Kenyan educator, John Ng'asike, who was also a key figure in his native Turkana pastoralist community. He demonstrated the need to position African indigenous epistemologies right at the front of science curriculum and instruction (Ng'asike, 2010). His dissertation challenged Kenya's dominant society, which falsely accuses Turkana traditional nomadic cultural traditions of being resistant to modern education. Instead, he demonstrated that elders' knowledge is crucial for environmental survival.

Denisse recalls, "I remember quite well that during the Q&A session another doctoral student who was an educator in the U.S. questioned his methods and findings because for her, it was impossible to merge science with traditional knowledge." As John's doctoral director, Beth was attentive, defending his decolonial research method, which focused on the concerns of non-Western communities, instead centering on self-determination and justice for colonized lands and people (Smith, 2012). Denisse noted that, "at the end of the defense, Beth wisely thanked John for his meticulous research and spoke from a situated knowledge position about the invaluable contribution of this type of research to mainstream academia." This acknowledgement of situated knowledges in a public defense underscored a key feminist stance that research and studies are a reflection of our personal, community, and local perspectives (see Haraway, 1988 for a full discussion of situated knowledges).

These stories show how everything we study, feel, and advocate for is connected. Study and work cannot be separated from family and kin; rather than fragments, Beth brings together our full selves. When you are part of her family, you are part of her entire family, without hesitation or reservations. Rather than fostering a climate of competition and reduction, her care both for and about her students and mentees creates a space of welcoming inclusion.

Legacies of Beth

For our final questions, we asked, “What are some ways Beth continues to influence your life? How are we paying it forward in our research, institutions, and activism?” Beth’s legacy continues to shape our lives, even as our paths have diverged. Jen is now a tenure-track faculty member at Arizona State University, while Kimberly is a diversity, equity, and inclusion learning and development consultant with the State of Minnesota, where she focuses on addressing structural inequalities across the state of Minnesota by influencing K-12 educational institutions and state governments to change the pipeline of opportunities for others. Denisse is an associate professor at Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana in Medellin, Colombia. However, while we are physically far apart, we remain stars in Beth’s constellation, as we regularly invoke her holistic praxis to advocate for and effect structural change.

Paying It Forward: Kim

The decision to leave academia was not one I took lightly. I was in a space where I felt confined by neoliberal expectations. I felt pressured to abandon the values of connection, justice, and generosity in order to meet the pressure of increasing output (e.g., teaching more courses, advising more students, etc.) to prove the value of my department. I knew I needed to leave, but I worried my exodus would mean I had once again disappointed those who had spent so much time and energy mentoring me to become a scholar.

I remember sitting at a cafe in Madison, Wisconsin anxiously telling Beth that I would be leaving my college to take a new position closer to my family as an instructional coach for a public school district in Minnesota. She was excited and immediately began to plot with me about possible research I would now be able to do with teachers and students. She helped me realize that scholarship was not bound by the constraints and expectations of the neoliberal academy. Beth assured me that my value lay far beyond the academy. And more recently, when I took on a new role as a learning and development consultant for the state of Minnesota, she shared in my excitement and again reminded me of the impact I can still make outside of academia.

Paying It Forward: Jen

For Jen, Beth’s approach to mentorship is one she carries with her: “Beth’s influence on my approach to academia cannot be overstated. She inspires me to see students as holistic beings, and that the path through academia can never be a one-size-fits-all approach. I try to bring that ethos to my mentorship of students as well, and understand them as they are, as whole beings encompassing their cultural history, their cultural values, and their own ethos and reasons for pursuing a doctoral or master’s degree.” Jen also works with several doctoral students, following Beth’s model of supporting them so they might flourish rather than languish in graduate school. “Beth and I still work closely together with LTGJ, even as Beth has moved into an active ‘community member’ role rather than as faculty—she’s more involved than ever!” Beth’s guidance in LTGJ’s formation and her continual support of the group is reflected in the ongoing impact LTGJ has on its members (Faragó et al., 2018).

Paying It Forward: Denisse

Beth continues to influence Denisse’s life in many ways. One of these is serving as a generous and committed scholar-activist role model. Beth embodies bell hooks’s (2013) call for a pedagogy of love that requires us to interact with students’ complete humanity, inviting them to be their best selves in the classroom and outside. Because of Beth’s influence, Denisse “was inspired to create in Colombia an action-research group fostering the feminist and decolonial values promoted by Beth in her writing groups and with LTGJ. In addition to that, Denisse was determined to open spaces or fabricate bridges for democratic popular science, embracing an intercultural, transdisciplinary, and onto-

epistemological dialogue through everyday practices, critical consciousness, and justice.” This group is called Grupo de Estudio en Ecología Política y Justicia Hídrica, and is inspired by Beth’s work connecting the local with the global.

Beth’s legacy is in us, and in her we found a kindred spirit, a role model for negotiating the role of justice in our scholar-activism, and a mentor not just for our research and activism, but for our whole lives. The neoliberal project cannot ever be complete because we exist, and we carry her ethos forward into all parts of our everyday lives. We will continue to challenge structural inequalities where we see them, both inside and outside the academy, and in the institutions where we work and share our stories. Her untempered generosity is a lighthouse beacon for us when it is dark, and through her, our network of conviviality, friendship, and kinship keeps growing.

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