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*Presidential Response*

THE PRIVILEGED CITIZEN AND THE CRITICAL STUDENT

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It is an honor to be asked to respond to Kathleen Knight Abowitz's rich essay, "Citizenship in Our Time." In the wake of 9/11, and perhaps more importantly, I think, welfare reform and global capitalism, among a range of other changes, it is vital for educators to engage with questions of citizenship. In fact, the New York State Supreme Court recently declared that a "sound basic education" is one that "instills the skills needed to be citizens." If one of our key jobs as educators is to encourage citizenship, then, as Abowitz asks, "what does a citizen look like?"

Knight Abowitz has done a wonderful job of reviewing the key literature on citizenship, and has distilled her own vision of what citizenship could mean in our global, postmodern age. In responding, always a problematic task, I mean to extend on and often trouble some of her ideas.

To begin, I must agree that questions of human agency are key. Knight Abowitz argues, I think rightly, that "citizenship is something that happens when people are engaged in activity for, with, on behalf of, or even against others." I would add, however, questions about the efficacy of such activity. Real agency is about the impact that can be made on the world. And this leads me to question aspects of her vision of "intersubjective" or "complementary" agency. For contained within this vision is an ethical commitment to a particular kind of practice as opposed to what she calls the "opposite of political agency: docility, obedience, and submission to authority."

How could anyone possibly disagree with this? Elsewhere, I have argued that practices of agency are invariably "strategic."<sup>1</sup> In other words, they serve particular purposes for particular times. Inherent in this view is a rejection of any idea that there is an ethics inherent in any particular practice. For example, underlying Knight Abowitz's vision of "intersubjective" agency appears to be some kind of model of collaborative democracy, *ala* Hannah Arendt or John Dewey, albeit with a more postmodern flavor. Most people in this room would probably have little argument with this general vision. But I am increasingly convinced that the prevalent academic embrace of collaborative democracy results, in part, from our collective social positioning. As discourse and other scholars have increasingly argued, success within a particular field of knowledge involves initiation into its mores and values.<sup>2</sup> And a number of scholars have increasingly argued that central to the professional values of America is a perspective on democracy. In his analysis of different activist groups, for example, Paul Lichterman describes how a form of collaborative democracy

emerged in the 1960s and later in multiple locations among activists from the middle-class, a form that these activists generally represented as neutral, even though other working-class, etc., groups held very different collective practices.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Fred Rose argues that in promoting these forms of collaborative democracy, “peace, environmental, or feminist movements may claim to advance universal goals, [even though] the benefits they promote often do serve the middle class.”<sup>4</sup> These forms, Rose argues, are really “a positive affirmation of new values resulting from growing affluence.” They tend to be focused more on values and process than on actual results. Working class folks, Rose, Lichterman, and others argue, are often much more focused on the achievement of pragmatic goals. They tend to be less concerned about the process by which these goals are achieved. This is not to say that they are *anti*-democratic, but instead that democracy of a particular kind is only one of many different values at play in their efforts to make change.

Nonetheless, I agree with Knight Abowitz that current approaches to citizenship in schools, which generally involve initiating students into state-sponsored forms of government, are extremely problematic. Although schools are funded by the state, they have the responsibility, I think, to develop a critical citizenship. And Knight Abowitz’s discussion of this is extremely valuable. She has, it seems to me, asked a very difficult question. How can we imagine an institution like a school teaching something that is, in essence, anti-institutional? Her answer is important and creative.

Drawing from Maxine Greene, Cornel West, and others, she imagines ways that the aesthetic realm might foster a kind of anti-institutional citizen engagement. Queer theorists have developed strategies of public theater, “poetic world making” as Knight Abowitz calls it; Laurent Berlant’s “diva citizenship.” This often involves an unpredictable resistance on the very ground of the systems one attempts to resist, similar to the kinds of aesthetic resistances conducted by a wide range of artists of different stripes in authoritarian regimes across the world.

Of course, there are limits. The challenge with a project such as this to walk the fine line between overt and covert resistance, and helping students understand (or learn through the results of their actions) the difference. In how many schools, for example, would an image of the “Statue of Liberty embodied by a man in drag, in shockingly garish eye-makeup and lipstick” “fly” on the “flagpole” as it were? Not many, I would submit, especially at times like today when such resistance to thoughtless patriotism is so needed. Yet within the tenuous limits of “diva citizenship” lies, I agree, some opportunity for reimagining and potentially transforming our shared public space from the corridors of schools that often look from the outside (and the inside as well) like

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prisons. It makes me wonder what other opportunities for the development of agency exist within schools that we tend to overlook.

Knight Abowitz concludes with a vision of “membership” that complicates and contests questions of “us vs. them.” Citing Phelan, she argues that “sexual” and other “strangers may offer one another and others new ways of questioning the current tight fabric of citizenship and national identity.” “All citizens must be recognized not in spite of one’s unusual or minority characteristics, but with those characteristics understood as part of a valid possibility for the conduct of life.” This seems right on the mark. The apparent stability of our political, sexual, and other identities make it difficult, as Janet Jakobsen agrees, to create “working alliances” across “difference.”<sup>5</sup> Yet I turn to Jakobsen to raise questions about this vision. Jakobsen extends on Knight Knight Abowitz’s vision in ways that seem (but may not be) implied in her paper. From an analysis of the history of American feminism, Jakobsen seeks to develop a vision of social movements without any clear “us/them” boundaries at all. And this is where I must demur. For it is *through* exclusion that local and extra-local actions against oppression generally find their foothold. Such actions generally involve the development of what Laclau and Mouffe have called imaginary (but quite material) collectives, often involving “obedience and submission” of different kinds.<sup>6</sup> These forms of collectivity have long informed labor unions and other groups fighting for practical, pragmatic social change. Community organizing groups often say that they have “no permanent enemies, no permanent friends;” they understand that their “boundaries” must remain fluid. But impermanent enemies they do have—and they know who is generally “us” and who is generally “them.”

What happens to morality within such a pragmatic world? I think Knight Abowitz’s desire to bring encounters with “strangers” into the school as one tool for breaking down the permanence of “us/them” boundaries is important. As we learned in Nazi Germany and Bosnia and Rwanda, frozen identity boundaries are incredibly dangerous. But, again, I don’t ultimately think we can look to a particular set of political or pedagogical practices for ethical values. And while I agree that humanistic Enlightenment values are useful, they are too decontextualized, too thin and vague, however intersubjective, to do much work on their own. Saul Alinsky found this out to his chagrin when the first activist group he founded, the Back of the Yards Organization, turned in its later years to racist efforts to prevent blacks from moving into its area.<sup>7</sup> It is no accident that much of the effective community organizing in America today is done by coalitions of congregations. Morality and ethics, I increasingly think, is a local phenomenon, and our philosophical discussions, while important, are often tangential. Congregational organizing groups, in contrast, often work directly with the basic tenets of Christianity, seeking ways to integrate their vision with the text of the bible—actively reinterpreting the text of their multi-denominational

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audience. Congregational organizing groups work in their training sessions to teach even ministers new ways to interpret their core religious values.<sup>8</sup> We and our students come to the table with rooted, lived values—we have no choice but to work with them.

Ultimately, Knight Abowitz’s vision of “diva citizenship” gives me hope for those who work to change schools from the inside. But the fact is that I have mostly given up on schools, and I think our tendency to focus on schools is at the core of our general inability to foster effective and progressive social change. It’s not that I think schools are unimportant. Nor do I deny that there are many opportunities for the development of critical agency within schools. But we all know that school reform, aside from individual schools and classrooms, is largely a failure. Anything much past “diva citizenship” in schools today, I think, is mostly a fantasy. This challenge implicitly limits what Knight Abowitz can and can’t say. More radical visions of confrontational social change just won’t fit in schools. But we work in schools of *education*, not schools of *schooling*. My own Department is one of few in the nation that focuses on community education. Increasingly, I have been pressing us to focus more on community organizing, and a new Certificate in Community Organizing is now wending its way through the bureaucracy. Political education takes place, mostly, outside of schools. Schools that get changed are often changed by those outside of schools. Yet community organizing for school reform—often based, for better or worse, in religion—is generally invisible to scholars of schooling. Educational scholars look out from the school building and generally see only parents and the compliant PTA. Until we broaden our focus, we will be left with critical literacy and “diva citizenship.” Important, I agree, but not nearly enough.

#### NOTES

1. Aaron Schutz, “Teaching Freedom? Postmodern Perspectives,” *Review of Educational Research* 70, no. 2 (2000): 215-53.
2. James Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies* (New York: Falmer Press, 1990); Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
3. Paul Lichterman, *The Search for Political Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
4. Fred Rose, “Toward a Class-Cultural Theory of Social Movements,” *Sociological Forum* 12, no. 3 (1997): 469.
5. Janet Jakobsen, *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).
6. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985).

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7. See Donald Reitzes and Dietrich Reitzes, *The Alinsky Legacy* (New York: JAI Press, 1987).
  8. See Mark Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
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