

The Activist-Scholar: A Responsibility “to confront and dismantle”

Interview with Ward Churchill

Edward J. Carvalho

Ward Churchill is a veteran activist-scholar and member of the Rainbow Council of Elders and (still) Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Before moving to Atlanta in 2012, he was a member of the leadership council of the American Indian Movement of Colorado, a position he'd held for 30 years.

An award-winning writer, Churchill has published more than 20 books on American Indian history and the suppression of political dissent in the United States. These include *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (1988, 2002), *The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars Against Dissent in the United States* (1990, 2002), *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas, 1492 to the Present* (1997), *On the Justice of Roosting Chickens: Reflections on the Consequences on U.S. Imperial Arrogance and Criminality* (2003), and, most recently, *A Decolonizing Encounter: Ward Churchill and Antonia Darder in Dialogue* (Pierre Orelus, ed., 2012).

Until 2007, Churchill was a tenured professor of American Indian Studies and chair of the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of Colorado Boulder. In what has been described as “the most important academic freedom case in a generation,” Churchill was fired because of his refusal to recant statements concerning the attacks of September 11, 2001. In 2009, a jury unanimously found that the University had violated his First Amendment rights, but this decision was vacated by the Colorado courts' decision to grant the University absolute immunity from suit. In 2013, after the U.S. Supreme Court declined to review his case, a petition addressing the suppression of indigenous history and academic freedom was filed with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights on Ward Churchill's behalf.

For more information on Churchill's case and his legal battle with the University of Colorado, please see *Academic Freedom in the*

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Post-9/11 Era (Edward J. Carvalho and David Downing, eds., 2010), which is based on the *Works and Days* special double-issue, *Academic Freedom and Intellectual Activism in the Post-9/11 University* (Edward J. Carvalho, ed. 51–54, 26–27.1/4, 2008–09). Both volumes include extensive scholarly analysis on the background and impact of Churchill's case, including what is largely believed to be the definitive statement on the subject from Churchill himself in his "Myth of Academic Freedom" essay.

Ed Carvalho: This *Works and Days/Cultural Logic* collaborative special issue focuses on the nexus between scholarship and activism, or what we're defining here as "scholactivism." Howard Zinn rightly saw you as working within the tradition of "scholar-activists," and your career certainly embraces all of the elements inherent to those practices and that mode of discourse. Starting with that frame of reference, I'd like to break this first question into thirds: 1) How do you define the term "scholactivism"?; 2) Why do you feel that academic work and activist commitments should overlap/intersect?; 3) What do you see as the fundamental responsibilities and duties of the "scholactivist"?

Ward Churchill: Well, let's start with the fact that while it carries certain connotations in common usage—we all use the term, and pretty much know, or think we know, what it means—when you break it down a bit, it ends up being rather vacuous. On its face, it would encompass anyone and everyone whose scholarship is consciously intended to further sociocultural, political, and economic objectives to which s/he's personally committed. That in itself would be sufficient to distinguish "scholactivists" from those pursuing "pure" scholarship, like that of the folks who devote their entire careers doing the archival research necessary to exhaustively compile and annotate the papers of Benjamin Franklin, for example.

The same holds true for the much larger mass of degree-certified "scholars" who never really produce any scholarship at all, or at least nothing worthy of the name. These aren't all merely academic placeholders, by the way, although a decided majority would certainly qualify as such. Still, there are a lot of good teachers in this group, and good teaching is both important and can certainly be a valid mode of activism. Nonetheless, without devaluing teaching in the least, I do think we need to be clear that in and of itself teaching isn't scholarship, and there's really no need to pretend otherwise. As *Sitting Bull* once and aptly put it, it's "not necessary for crows to be eagles." It's probably worth mentioning before leaving this point that I'm saying this as someone who has always taken considerable pride in my teaching and am pretty good at it, at least if one takes as indication that students consistently rated my classes as being among the top five percent offered by the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Colorado.

In any case, with the wheat thus separated from the chaff, so to speak, we're still left with the uncomfortable reality the term "scholactivist" would facially include a substantial body of people

forming the academic core of what Noam Chomsky calls the U.S. doctrinal system, all of whom knowingly employ the scholarly apparatus to reinforce the various orthodoxies—in other words, the array of codes and distortion-filled narrative “truths”—with which the status quo is sustained. The entire liberal intelligentsia fits this description, as does its “conservative” counterpart, and they are of course *not* who we’re referring to when we use the term “scholactivist.” Quite the opposite, in fact; it connotes those whose work is frankly counterhegemonic.

By that, I mean those whose scholarship is intended to confront and dismantle the master narratives, exposing their inherent falsity and concomitantly advancing far more accurate explanations of events, processes, and power relations. The goal is invariably to transform popular consciousness in a manner validating and empowering opposition to the status quo, thereby facilitating radical change. That sounds rather complicated, I suppose, but it’s actually not. In fact, I’d argue that it’s a vastly more straightforward task than undertaking the convoluted manipulations of both facts and logic necessary to producing establishmentarian material. The trick, if it may be called that, is often no more than insisting upon calling things by their right names rather than inventing euphemisms with which to disguise them and pointing out semantic subterfuges of that kind when they appear in the work of those routinely touted as “responsible scholars.”

At this point, I simply can’t resist the temptation to invoke the authority of a legal scholar no less imminent than the late Antonin Scalia by quoting his assertion that “words have meaning, and the meanings don’t change.” Actually, they do, but not to the point of nullification or becoming antonyms of themselves. Besides, the good Justice’s observation was “pure applesauce,” a prime example of his customary “jiggery-pokery” with perhaps a splash of rama-lama-ding-dongery thrown in for good measure. Bluntly put, ol’ Tony didn’t even mean the words with which he asserted the meaning of words, as is abundantly revealed in his lengthy stream of judicial opinions and other writings. In contrast, scholactivists actually adhere to the principle Scalia articulated.

There’s a lot more that we could and probably should get into, like the distinction to be drawn between scholars and intellectuals, for instance, and the significance of Antonio Gramsci’s concept of organic intellectuals. For me, there’s also a genuine distinction to be drawn between scholar-activists and activist-scholars. Having already cut my teeth as an activist by 1969, and having never been referred to as a scholar until the early ‘90s, I place myself in the latter category. But these are conversations we’ll need to have another day. The bottom line of scholactivism of any variety is that those claiming the mantel are obliged not just to talk the talk, but to walk the walk. In other words, there’s a responsibility to engage in concrete actions right along with the nonscholars whose liberation struggles we purportedly embrace, outside the comfort zone of the academy. Absent such tangible engagement, scholactivism is merely a sham.

Carvalho: Perhaps more so than any other contemporary figure (though Norman Finkelstein certainly comes to mind here, as well),

I think, given your story, you're perhaps the most suited to speak about the risks and related consequences—existential, career-based, or from a professional reputation standpoint, etc.—associated with pursuing a life rooted in scholactivism. What do you see as the inherent dangers of engaging in such activity in today's post-9/11 academic (un)freedom climate, and do you find the same sets of circumstances, vis-à-vis the kind of "new McCarthyism" that impacted you, are still at work in today's political and academic climate?

Churchill: Are they still at work? Oh, hell yeah. The recent Salaita case at the University of Illinois should be more than sufficient to demonstrate that. And, unless I've missed a breaking news flash, Norman Finkelstein hasn't found a faculty position at another university. The same with Nicolas de Genova, at least in the U.S., although I understand he's teaching at King's College in London these days. And Steven Salaita, of course, has ended up going from a tenured position at Virginia Tech to a temporary gig at the American University in Beirut.

As for me, well, being blacklisted is a very interesting experience. Really, I used to receive more invitations to speak on campuses than I could possibly handle, even when I was doing fifty or more lectures a year, and I was good enough at it to end up with my own entry in *American Voices*, right along with Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, and Louis Farrakhan, if you can believe that. Then, in 2005, my talks started being canceled by administrators all over the country, and by 2006 I was no longer receiving invitations because, really, what would've been the point of inviting me if the administration was automatically going to intervene?

Ironically, I was, for a variety of reasons, already cutting back on the number of invitations I accepted, so the impact on me, personally, hasn't been especially severe, or at least it's been far less than was undoubtedly intended. The fact is that I'm still delivering about as many public lectures as I want in any given year. The symbolism of my blacklisting, however, is another matter altogether. It amplifies and extends the chilling effect produced by my firing and the variations embodied in the examples of Finkelstein, de Genova, Salaita, and others over the past decade. Especially among younger and aspirant faculty, the degree of chill is notoriously difficult to measure. But it's there, of that we can be sure.

Carvalho: Who would you say are today's leading scholactivists working in the academy?

Churchill: Jeez, Ed, talk about a loaded question. But, what the hey, I'll give it a go. I mean, there's always Chomsky. He's emeritus at this point, but that still counts as being "in the academy," right? And obviously he's still working, albeit not at the proverbial "book-of-the-week" pace he seemed to maintain a while back. But he's amazingly productive for a guy who's closing in on 90. Hope I can still be doing half as well twenty-odd years down the line.

Same with Richard Falk, who's emeritus professor of international

law at Princeton, about the same age as Noam, and still quite active, both politically and as a legal scholar.

Then there's [H.] Bruce Franklin. Last I heard, he still held the John Dana Chair in literature at Rutgers, although he's only five or six years younger than Chomsky. He's still working, I think, although I've not heard about his publishing anything major since the revised and expanded edition of *War Stars* came out back in 2008. Anybody who hasn't read that really should, along with his *Vietnam and Other Fantasies* and *Mythmaking in America*, as they're models of how to do literary analysis in a politically engaged and constructive manner, rather than wandering off into some jargon-filled theoretical la-land.

Another, irrespective of whatever political disagreements we may have had over the years, is certainly Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, who's now emeritus professor of history at Cal State-East Bay (Hayward). She's a dozen or so years older than me, and younger than Chomsky by about the same amount, so I'm not quite sure whether she should be considered part of his generation or mine, or maybe representative of a generation in between, but, in any case, she's still at it. Maybe more than ever in some respects.

Of those who are clearly part of my own generation, Angela Davis is no doubt the most prominent example, followed rather closely by Kathleen Cleaver. There's also Muhammad Ahmad, known as Max Stanford back in the day, who was a prime mover in the Revolutionary Action Movement—RAM—and is still politically active in Philadelphia. Last I heard, he was teaching in Afro-Am at Temple, and *We Will Return in the Whirlwind*, his history of black radical organizations from 1960–75, is a really significant piece of work in terms of its utility to those who aspiring to continue the struggle.

That said, I'd put the Seneca historian Barbara Alice Mann at the very top of my list. She's at the University of Toledo, which has treated her rather shabbily over the years, although, near as I can tell, she's out-performed the rest of its history department combined. I'd recommend virtually anything she's ever published—and that's a lot—especially *George Washington's War on Native America* and *The Tainted Gift* as exemplars of how to do indigenous history the *right* way. That's to say first that the perspective she brings to her work arises directly from her lifelong activism within Ohio's American Indian communities and is thus entirely consistent with and reinforcing of those peoples' understandings of their historical experiences of settler colonialism, and, second, that she employs all the approved methods of archival research to expose the falsity of officially sanctioned historiography while demonstrating the validity of what native people have been saying all along. She does all this, moreover, with a writing style that, notwithstanding her voluminous footnotes, is perfectly accessible to the folks whose truths she's telling. Now, I don't see how it's possible to expect more than that. Barbara's truly a role model, and not just for Indians. Her approach is adaptable to a variety of contexts.

One of my old cohorts in Colorado AIM, George Tinker—he's an Osage, and professor of religion at Iliff School of Theology—ranks right up there as well, and for many of the same reasons. So does

Akinyele Umoja, chair of Afro-Am at Georgia State, although the extent of his activism with the New African Peoples' Organization and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement has precluded his being especially prolific. Check out his *We Will Shoot Back*, though, and you'll see why I rate him so highly. Finkelstein would of course be in here, too, although he's always been pretty much a solo act, and, as we know, is no longer in the academy. And Henry Giroux, who finally got tired enough of the long slog through the eternal tar of the U.S. academy that he upgraded to a position at McMaster University in Canada. There are others—former Panther Jamal Joseph at Columbia, for one, although he's primarily a filmmaker—but fewer and fewer. Time takes its toll and, let's face it, we old dogs who got our various starts during the '60s and '70s are steadily fading away.

Which takes us to the younger generation or, more accurately, generations. Dylan Rodríguez, chair of Ethnic Studies at UCal Riverside, springs immediately to mind, as does Daniel Burton-Rose, although I think maybe he's still a doctoral student. Another is Robert Perkinson, a former student of mine who's now on the American Studies faculty at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, although I can't attest to his still being active outside the academy. And I suppose that Joy James, at Williams College, should be mentioned. Steven Salaita would be, were it not for the recent sleaziness at the University of Illinois, which had the effect of removing him from the academy altogether.

After that, I'm embarrassed to say, I'm drawing a blank. This isn't to say there aren't any: I'm sure there are. It may be that I've simply lost touch over the past ten years, but I don't really think so. A more likely explanation, it seems to me, will be found in a combination of factors, including the reality that the nature of activism has changed quite dramatically over the past several decades. It's been a long time since there were sustained movements for radical change that were national or international in scope. Consequently, there's been nothing of that sort for younger folks to tie into or emerge from. Activism has thus become much more localized, which is both good and bad, but makes it a lot harder to keep track of who's doing what.

There are other factors feeding into this, of course. For one thing, the left's so-called turn to theory during the mid-to-late '70s served to detach radical scholarship from on-the-ground activism, and the debilitating impact on bona fide scholactivism continues to be felt. Finally, there've been some really dramatic changes in publishing over the past twenty years, with an ever-increasing number of electronic venues allowing for such a volume of material with so little pretense of quality control that it overwhelms both the capacity and the incentive to try and remain current. This, too, makes it harder to keep track of who's actually doing good work, and, since there's no longer a need to actually finish something before "releasing" it electronically, may hinder more than a few people from doing it. Call me a dinosaur, but I really don't see this as an improvement.

Carvalho: You've mentioned Steven Salaita several times. Cary Nelson believes that his case had little to do with academic freedom violations and more to do with Salaita's qualifications as a candidate,

specifically whether his remarks would raise concerns over campus safety or were reflective of responsible academic citizenship. What are your thoughts on this?

Churchill: Cary utterly disgraced himself.

Carvalho: It's certainly fitting that we talk with you again and include you in this conversation since your case was such a focal point for the special *Works and Days* volume on academic freedom we released in 2009 (and later included in a more abbreviated form for the book adaptation *Academic Freedom in the Post-9/11 Era*). Since that time, the case progressed as follows: Your claim against the University of Colorado-Boulder was heard by the Colorado courts; the jury decision awarded to you was vacated by Judge Larry Naves; a challenge to Naves's ruling was brought to the Colorado Supreme Court (which ultimately supported Naves); and then, finally, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to weigh in on the matter. Would you briefly bring us up to speed on any further developments on your case absent from this narrative? Additionally, some readers might not realize you've been quite busy with a variety of writing projects since this time. Can you provide us with some details on the kinds of writing projects you've worked on recently or are in the process of developing?

Churchill: The only significant piece you missed is that after Naves's ruling was upheld by the state appellate, the Colorado Council of the AAUP launched an investigation of my case. They did a remarkably thorough job—it took them damned near two years to complete it—and they released a 136-page report in November 2011, detailing exactly how the administration had systematically subverted the institutional mechanisms supposedly securing my academic freedom, and how a select group of my faculty "colleagues" had actively collaborated in finding me guilty of "research misconduct." Better still, they went through the "charges" against me one by one, demonstrating that I'd actually committed *none* of the scholarly offenses of which I'd been publicly "convicted," and that the lengthy report of the collaborating faculty committee supposedly documenting my academic high crimes and misdemeanors was itself fraudulent from start to finish. Indeed, the AAUP investigators concluded that its authors were not only guilty of every one of the breaches of scholarly standards they'd falsely attributed to me, but a couple of others, as well.

You'll forgive me for feeling that was a reasonably important turn of events, given the national attention given my case from 2006–09. Cary Nelson apparently concurred, since he published the entire Colorado Council report in the 2012 issue of *Academic Freedom*, along with an article I'd submitted on related matters. Although *AF* is readily accessible online, as is the report in its own right, it has, so far as I can tell, been essentially ignored by the professoriate. Whenever my case or my scholarship comes up, the university's bogus findings continue to be invoked as if they comprised the last word on such matters. It would be hard to find a better example of

the “don’t confuse us with the facts” mode of maintaining “scholarly standards”—which is to say, academic gatekeeping—wouldn’t you say?

On the legal front, there’s not a lot to say other than that there’s been surprisingly little reaction from academics to the implications of the U.S. high court’s declining to rule in my case, given that this let stand a precedent potentially according quasi-judicial immunity to board of regents at every public university in the country, a maneuver that stands to gut tenure protection altogether. I immediately filed a petition for hearing on censorship grounds with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which was duly accepted. Since the Commission’s queue is a couple of thousand cases deep, however, lord only knows when, if ever, a hearing might actually occur. It’ll happen when and if it happens and, meanwhile, I’ve got other things to do.

As to writing, well, yeah, I’m at it again. I just finished putting together a new book of selected essays, *Wielding Words as Weapons*, about a decade behind schedule, which is now in production with PM Press; a revised and expanded edition of *From a Native Son* is ready to go; and the material is mostly written for a third such volume, as yet untitled. Also published a long entry on the impact of European colonization on indigenous peoples in the *Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism* this year, and have another on relations between blacks and Indians coming out in the *Black Power Encyclopedia*. Wrote a long essay on FBI operations against the Black Liberation Army that was originally intended as the introduction but ended up being published as the epilogue to BLA POW Jamil Muntaqim’s 2015 book, *Escaping the Prism*, as well as the intro to a new edition of former Black Panther political prisoner Eddie Marshall Conway’s *Marshall Law*. And I’ve done a few pieces, just for the novelty of doing them, like the liner notes for a vinyl album coming out from a politically rather smash-mouth band, and the intro to *500 Years of Resistance*, a graphic novel by Gord Hill.

If anything, the pace of my publishing schedule will probably pick up a bit over the next couple of years. Truth is, I’ve got enough of a stockpile of partially finished material to last the rest of my life. Somewhat paradoxically, that’s one of the benefits accruing from all the bullshit I’ve had to respond to over the past decade.

Carvalho: Finally, what do you see as the future of scholactivism and what advice do you have for the next generation of scholactivists?

Churchill: Such processes are always cyclical, so it may be that the recent emergence of incipient national movements like Black Lives Matter will favorably alter the calculus of what’s been happening in recent decades. Lacking a crystal ball, I’ll not venture into the realm of prophecy. All I can say is, we’ll see. There will always be genuine scholactivists, of that I’m sure, although it’s an open question as to how many will be lodged in the academy, or whether we even need to be. There are certainly a host of worthy examples of activist-scholars who never held a university position, or did so only

transiently, but that's another conversation, distinct from the issue of whether we have every *right* to be there. We do, obviously enough, but, hey, this is America.

As regards to advice for the next generation, it's that if you're not taking heat, you're not doing your job. Never back down or compromise your integrity by equivocating about what you know to be true. Find your validation among those who count, and measure it by the enemies you make among those who shouldn't.

