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Teaching Public Scholarship: Jacqueline Leavitt's Living Legacy

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Some lessons take a while to sink in, but once they are planted they continue to bear fruit. Twenty-five years ago Jackie Leavitt taught me a lesson that still guides my ideas and actions. I know that it's been exactly twenty-five years because a few months later the city erupted in the LA Uprising. Her lesson had less to do with what you might expect — things like data, technology, or research design. It had more to do with something amorphous, revolutionary, and enduring. Her lesson was about the relationship between the university and the city, and the methods and magic of public scholarship.

At the time, I was an urban planning master's student in a group client project Jackie directed with the esteemed community organizer Nora King. Ms. King was then Vice-Chair of the Nickerson Garden's Public Housing Resident Council that served 5,000 people in the largest low-income housing complex west of the Mississippi. King was a fighter and an optimist. Her leadership vision was rooted in hope. "The biggest part for me," King said, "is to give hope to the people. I'm stepping out on faith." ("Watts", 1995). Her leadership endured for three decades and she went on to become president of the Nickerson Gardens Management Corporation that represented residents to the Los Angeles Housing Authority.¹

Jackie and King developed this collaboration based on shared experience and trust, and we students went to work for the Resident Council as our client. We studied a range of issues related to life in Nickerson Gardens — from access to Laundromats, awareness of local histories, the logistics of home ownership and public housing, and demographic change. Jackie let me focus on culture and the arts. This was important to me as an artist and a new

1. Ms. King was a radiant, friendly, and aspirational leader who touched many lives before she died in Lynwood at the age of 70.

mom in an intercultural marriage (I am from a Jewish family, born to an immigrant mother from the Middle East, and my former husband is black from northeastern Brazil). Culture and the arts were equally important to the Resident Council that wanted to honor local culture and learn to organize households with distinct cultures, languages, and faiths. At the time, South Los Angeles was experiencing a dramatic shift from majority black leadership and families to a resurgence of Latinx families with close ties to Mexico and Central America.

Our community-based research was guided, critiqued, and informed by Nickerson Gardens residents. Throughout the project, we crisscrossed the city. The Resident Council spent time at UCLA. UCLA students spent time at Nickerson Gardens. Jackie explained the aim of our team effort to the press in this way, “The hope is that we can set a precedent for the school and students to become more sensitized to the harsh realities of providing decent housing and services.” (“Students”, 1989) Our final report for the Resident Council was called “Residents Leading the Way.” The cover photo spotlighted two happy children, a black boy and a Latina girl, holding hands as they walked confidently into the future.

How does the work we did with Jackie differ from other kinds of social research? Public scholarship provides a good lens to view her teaching and applied research methodologies. Public scholars are committed to applying academic expertise to community-engaged research that aims to impact social and/or environmental issues. Jackie was a public scholar. Working with her inspired me to be one too. Public scholarship cultivates mutualist, symbiotic relationships with communities. In my view, public scholarship is also shaped by social movements. For example, feminist research acknowledges that women and girls know things that matter, asks questions that women or girls want to be answered, and uses research to invest in positive outcomes benefitting women and girls (Harding, 1983). Much of Jackie’s research paid close attention to the lives, experiences, and spaces important to women and their families. The notion that researchers can link thought to action has been critical to struggles against white supremacy. W.E.B. Dubois believed that knowledge alone was not enough. (Dubois, 2000). Creating a better world requires positive action.

Being a public scholar entails forging trustworthy relationships between universities and communities, neighborhoods, organizations, social initiatives, and policy makers. Public scholars work for the community. This is a different vision and lifestyle than an academic who believes they work solely

for a board of regents. Public scholarship is rooted in a deep ethical commitment to community well being and is cognizant of historical and institutional systems that disenfranchise marginalized groups. It uses rigorous methods to ask questions that matter to communities, and invests in action for social justice. That is what Jackie wanted us to learn.

At first, Jackie's lesson wasn't easy for me to grasp. I was pregnant during the time I worked with her and was beleaguered by morning sickness. Motherhood was somewhat shunned. There was no respectable term like student-parent. Many women scholars of Jackie's era bypassed motherhood in their attempts to break down the glass ceiling in higher education. The notion that motherhood could set women back was also dominant off campus. One of our community project partners, who was herself a mom, pulled me aside during one of our research sessions and said, "Why did you do that?" Why work your way through graduate school to sabotage your career by becoming a mom? Ironically, our research aimed to serve families, and, in particular, women-led households.

Call me naïve. Sure, I was naïve. I didn't yet realize that the so-called glass ceiling was actually a glass house with four walls and a foundation. There was, and still are, many obstacles separating mothers from public leadership, and marginalized people — women, people of color, immigrants, low-income households — from leadership in the university and in our cities. How does one break through a glass house? The answer may be with a pickaxe, and by learning how to do things differently. Audre Lorde wrote that we need new tools to dismantle the master's house. (Lorde, 1983). We need different tools, different knowledge, and different ways. Jackie was a woman with a different way.

When I worked with Jackie I was tired. I innocently imagined myself hiding my pregnancy bump under the blue graduation gown, but I was clueless about the mega-production going on inside me as I became host to a new life. Powerful physiological forces made it difficult for me to keep up with her rigorous thesis expectations while juggling my graduate student researcher work study job and regular coursework. One day our team was rehearsing for a presentation before Ms. King and the Resident Council. I was ill prepared. I realized this only once I got in front of our work group to practice the material we'd be presenting in Watts. I asked to stop. I would better prepare and try again at our next meeting. She wouldn't permit it. The long minutes tick-tocked by in slow motion as I sweated it out. It felt brutal. She didn't let me off the hook. Yes, it was her expression of hard love. From that day

forward, I dove head on into my studies. I donned white gloves, immersed myself in UCLA's historical archive, and unearthed an ancient hand-drawn map of Rancho Tajauta (the area now known as Watts). I found relics decrying Watts as "The Hub of the Universe" in public transit marketing materials for the Red Line. I learned about Jim Crow exclusionary housing covenants and the racist naming of the area as Mudtown. I studied the musical vitality of the Central Avenue jazz scene. I read about Bidley Mason, the black woman midwife, nurse, and landowner who founded the First African Methodist Episcopal Church in the area. I became grounded in the multi-cultural roots of the city I was born in. I never came ill prepared to a presentation again. I set high expectations for myself, and my students. I do this because the community deserves the best, and we won't experience the epiphanies of learning if we don't make the effort.

I used to think that getting an argument right, and backing it up with accurate data, was enough to change minds and impact decision-making. I imagined public policy as a kind of Holy Grail and thought good ideas had their own inherent power. Since that time, I've helped imagine and shape public policy at local and regional levels. However, these experiences revealed to me that intentions and information are not always enough. We need participation. Sooner or later, we come face-to-face with power — what folks call "the powers that be" — or the ideas, practices, and institutions that continue to reproduce inequality. I now believe that we need more than good arguments and sound information to spark change. We need to work differently. Jackie's methods of public scholarship provided me a map to do that. Employing her strategies in my own teaching, research, and service triggers the immediate, tangible, positive impact of inclusion. Committing to inclusion expands knowledge, networks, and makes change possible.

Learning to work with community, for community, has changed my professional and personal life more than any other academic skill I learned during my formal education. I now understand that I am a part of a legacy of ethical academic activism that began long before me and will continue after I am gone. This has not always made my career path simple, but it has made my life meaningful beyond compare.

With Jackie, I learned the power of steadfast and trustworthy collaboration on and off campus. I learned that the community deserves the best from me, and from all of us. I've enjoyed the thrill of experiencing social impact in a personal way and witnessed it in the lives of my students and community peers. We are, in fact, slowly and diligently reshaping our worlds. This makes

me a more hopeful mother, educator, and intellectual.

I am now a faculty member in a graduate university. I perform community-based research and teach courses with robust civic engagement. I've coordinated successful community partnerships and public scholarship in every post that I have held, and I will continue to do so. My two children are grown adults — intercultural, multi-disciplinary artists in Los Angeles. I see my own role as a resource for the city, a resource for student learning, a rock for my children, and a catalyst for innovation, inclusion, and social change.

The blessings and challenges of public scholarship were seeded in Jackie's classroom. Twenty-five years later, I still refer back to her methods and practices — forged in the fire with Jackie Leavitt and Nora King — as our city was poised to erupt from frustration with the gross inequalities that hold families back from living a good life. I learned Jackie's lesson of how to generate knowledge that matters to communities, teaching methods of ethical and inclusive learning, and collaborating to serve the highest aims for livable cities. When we remember Jackie or re-read her body of work, I hope we also pause to recall *how* she did what she did, and helped us all do what we do better.

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