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### Because Nothing is Sufficient, We Must Use Everything

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# **Because nothing is sufficient, we must use everything.**

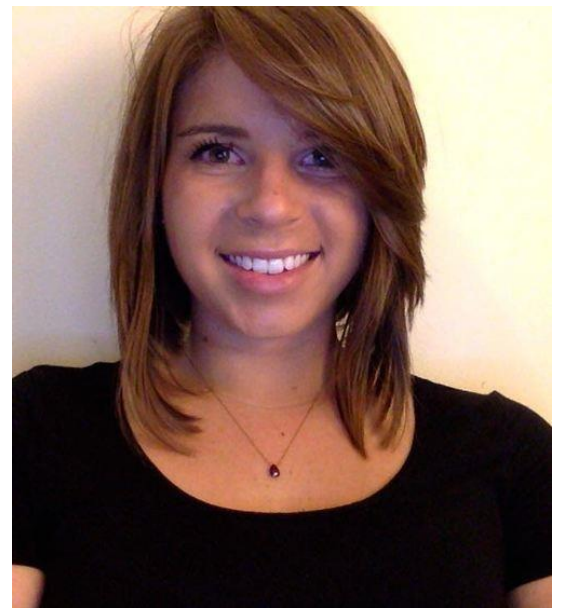
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Part 1 of 4 in our series on "Academia/Activism and other (unnecessary) binaries"

“Because nothing is sufficient, we must use everything,” Rebecca Fullan recently remarked, which is how I’ve come to understand the relationship between academia and activism. Since beginning my Ph.D. program in English at the CUNY Graduate Center, I’ve struggled with the relationship between academic institutions and the grassroots, community-based, activist work that takes place on the streets (and other spaces). Instead of allowing a feminist interpretation of a text to substitute for, rather than inspire, political action, I want to ask how activism and academia can mutually inform one another without collapsing the meaningful differences between the two. How, for instance, is a class on African-American literature different from the [#BlackLivesMatter movement](#), and how might the two work in tandem to take down the capitalist, white supremacist heteropatriarchy? In addition to troubling the activism/academia binary, I also want to emphasize that talking about feminism, antiracism, and material conditions of inequality from within a classroom *will never be enough*. I honestly hope that when students leave my class they feel uncomfortable and upset about our present, but also eager, desirous, and capable of changing it.

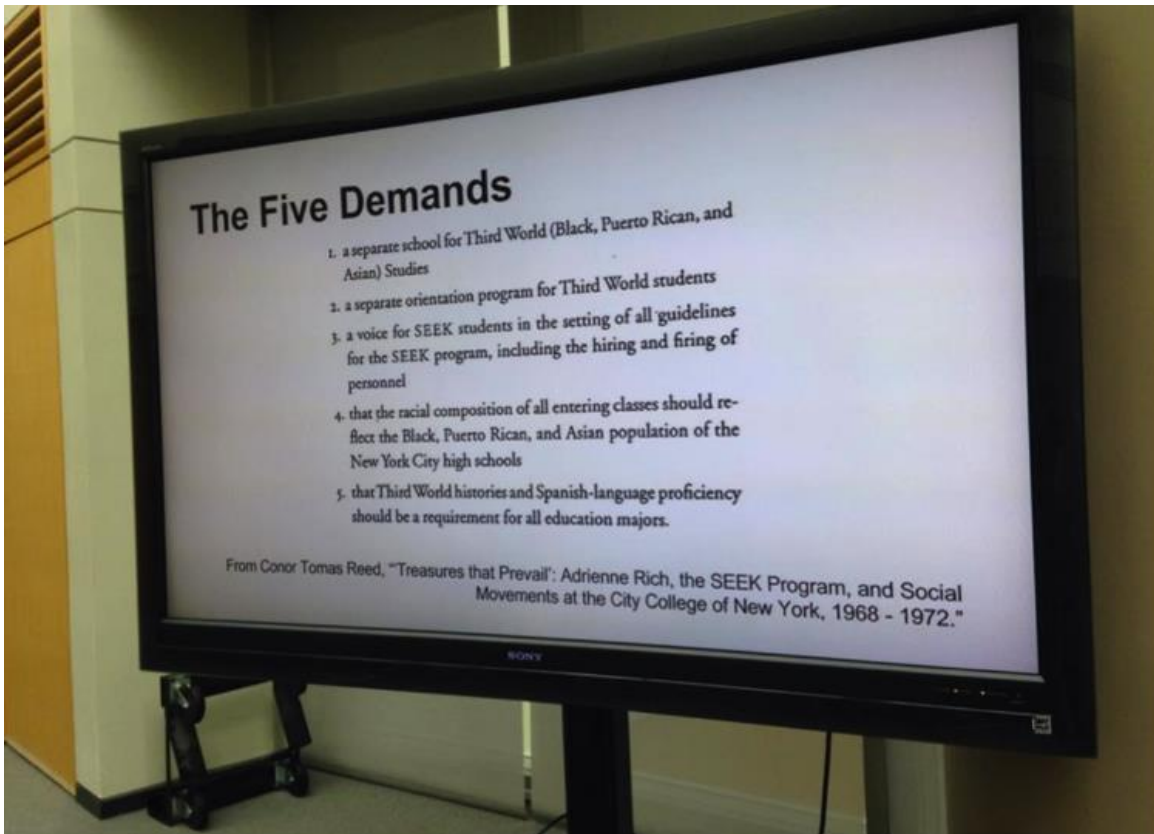
Here are several ways we can complicate the activism/academia binary.



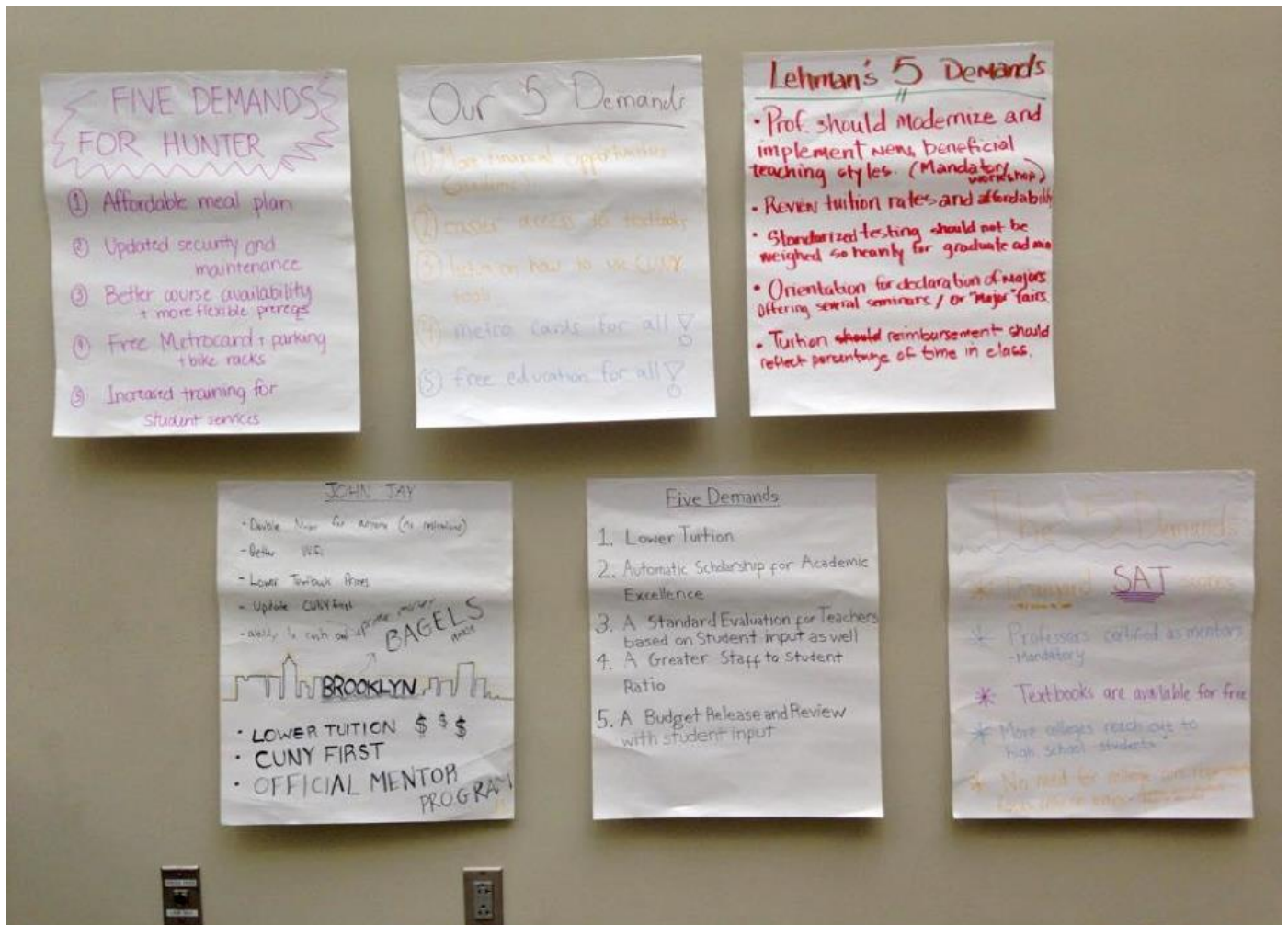
## **Danica Savonick, CUNY Graduate Center**

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First, by remembering that opportunities for women and people of color to receive an education are themselves the products of activism. Recently, I had the opportunity to teach City University of New York (CUNY) students about the history of black and Latino student activism on their campuses:



At this hour-long workshop we discussed the 1969 student strike in which black and Latino students and their allies shut down the South campus of City College for two weeks, and set up Harlem University in its place. Their demands included student governance, changes to the Anglo-American, Eurocentric, white supremacist curriculum, and changes to admissions procedures so that “that the racial composition of all entering classes should reflect the Black, Puerto Rican, and Asian population of the New York City high schools” (Tomás-Reed 49). “What do you demand from your education?” I asked groups of students who attend various campuses throughout the CUNY system.



I can't be sure whether students left that workshop eager to organize a campus shut-down, or feeling empowered to improve their modest facilities. However, these histories show students that things like free public education, affirmative action, and in the case of CUNY the SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) program, are both desirable—many students have been taught to think otherwise—and the hard-won victories of community organizing and political struggle.

Second, inspired by Barbara Christian's "The Race for Theory," I want to suggest that there is work to be done within academia to help bring about a more just, equitable, and pleasurable future. Christian's essay taught me that while the discipline of English privileges a narrow canon of white, male literary theorists, people of color *have always theorized*, though it hasn't gotten to count as theory. This idea, compounded with the social, grassroots historical narratives I was exposed to in graduate school, but that had been entirely absent from my earlier education (from

the Haitian Revolution to the Watts rebellion) convinced me that people of color have always been integral to the historical production of our present, though their participation is often erased, and particularly through education. This knowledge of education's complicity in producing a racist, sexist status quo now informs everything I do in my teaching and research.

The third way we can trouble the activism/academia binary is by looking to both for spaces in which minoritarian (queer, feminist, antiracist, decolonial, etc.) knowledge production can flourish. Towards the activist end of the spectrum we find examples like the Free University of NYC and on the academic end, organizations like Mentoring Future Faculty of Color (MFFC), started by Dr. Kandice Chuh, which seeks to address conditions of institutional racism and sexism and to support diversity as an epistemological, methodological, and pedagogical project. Two others that I've recently become involved with are HASTAC (the Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory) and the Futures Initiative, both of which create spaces for challenging the structures of power that have produced the injustices and inequalities of our present. HASTAC and the Futures Initiative operate according to the principle of "collaboration by difference," which I understand to mean that any task, project, or conversation will be drastically more complex, nuanced, and robust (i.e. better) if we seek, from the very beginning, to include multiple, diverse perspectives, and especially those that are most silenced by the status quo. This means people of color, women, people who identify as queer, transgender, or gender non-conforming, people who may be differently abled, and in the context of classrooms, it can also mean students.

Recently, I was invited to kick off The University Worth Fighting For, a year-long series of workshops that tie student-centered pedagogical practices to institutional change, race, equality, and social justice. As a way of continuing this conversation about activism and academia, I invite the readers of critical ethnic studies to contribute to our forum, Towards a Pedagogy of Equality, which explores what a classroom informed by activist principles of participatory governance, intentional space-making, and inclusivity might look like.

## **Works Cited**

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