Lessons from E. San Juan Jr. on Resistance, Diversity and Anti-Materialism in the Academy

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Abstract  
Throughout his astoundingly productive career, San Juan has unmasked how the intelligentsia becomes imbricated in the abuses of capitalism, colonialism and racism, and demands that those in the privileged space of the academy acknowledge and address ever-increasing inequality. He has dissected the theories and methodologies deployed in pedagogy and scholarship at different historical moments and has shown how issues of class, political economy, and (internal and international) colonialism become abstract and immaterial in the hands of intellectuals, even those who proclaim alliance with the wretched of the earth.

Keywords  
academy, American and cultural studies, class, diversity, ethnic, historical materialism, intersectionality, Marxism, postmodernism

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When it became clear that the play of negotiated hybrid transnational identities would provide no shield for Iraqis during “shock and awe” or help the U.S. antiwar majority to stop it, the most explicit postmodernist and postcolonialist influences in the academy here waned, or have been proven patently absurd by events (Lazarus). Still, abstract textualism, individualist narratives, and a general rejection of the caricature of Marxism retain significant currency throughout classrooms, conferences, journals, and academic publishing houses. The commodification of knowledge occurs in a market where certain kinds of methods and ideas prove more lucrative than others, and often merely portends trends that are especially rewarded at any given time. However, the production of knowledge, whatever its guise, most thrives when it obscures capitalism, ignores class processes, and encourages students to decontextualize an array of materialities, even or especially those addressing oppression.

This feat has been accomplished frequently by the popularity of postcolonialism and postmodernism, whereby faculty convinced their students that it is only through a thorough understanding of Derrida or Foucault or Spivak that they can truly interpret their world: an act of diversion, subterfuge, and mystification that ensures that any efforts at institutional change become muddled and consigned to inefficacy. Currently, the residual postalities combine with the hollowing out of intersectionality to neutralize its political potential: in particular, the erasure of class and its role as a process of capitalism in representations and calculations of intersectional identity (Zavarzedeh, Ebert, and Morton). A parallel process works at the level of classroom politics. Promising radical, empowering critiques are tamped down by textbook content, scholarly and pedagogical methods, and messages of professors who often fail to confront exploitation. Instead, discourse obscures the material realities of labor. In this paper, we will show how E. San Juan, Jr.’s scholarship and experience in the academy in the early 1990s to the present has elucidated and critiqued systematically the U.S.-based academy’s complicity with the promotion of capitalism in its institutionalized racism, classism, ties to multinational corporations, and the social relations of production. In so doing, we use his work as a lens through which to view classroom and pedagogical styles, samples of recent scholarly production, and the business of academic conferencing serving this larger agenda.

THE STATE OF THE UNIVERSITY: CLASS CANCELLED

Universities are economically supported in a number of ways: from state grants, corporate ties, student tuition dollars (and the loans many must take) to alumni associations—all of which combine to pay faculty and staff, maintain and build new
facilities, among other costs. Producers of knowledge must take into account the prerogatives of their administrative managers and the needs of what in effect have become student-consumers and their individual, federal and/or corporate sponsors. In serving both, faculty members are constrained by bureaucracy, if bolstered by the energy and concerns of their students, and generally ascribe to neoliberal values. Even when truly committed to inducing concrete change in the lives of their students and the structure within which they operate (i.e. a department), faculty members serve the institution that employs them, an institution that replicates capitalism on a micro-level and supplies appropriately trained workers to compete for class positions.

The wholesale rejection of Marxism among academics currently has surely come as a relief to administrators and colleagues who are freed from the pesky demands of activist-academics who insist on bringing up equality, capitalism, and colonialism. San Juan highlights the use of charges of “class reductionism” or ‘economism’ as a weapon to silence anyone who calls attention to the value of one’s labor power, or one’s capacity to work in order to survive, if not to become human” (Correspondence). Within the humanities, this effort has largely succeeded. Still, despite the white noise of postalities’ play and the muting of class analysis, the unequal, often brutal, relations of capitalism create a cacophony that echoes steadily.

As we navigate the different sites of academia focusing on conference proceedings, classrooms, and publications that are part of American, Cultural and Ethnic Studies (and in other single disciplines), we can see the creative ways that issues of class are bypassed in the service of the most popular ephemera of the university system. In doing so, we will keep in mind that critiques of the intelligentsia are inherently self-incriminating, yet necessary. While operating in the university, lodged in belly of the beast, it is possible to forget that we are integral to the structures many of us interrogate as professors. As Antonio Gramsci observes in the Prison Notebooks, “traditional intellectuals . . . put themselves forward autonomous and independent from the dominant social group. This self-assessment is not without consequences in the ideological and political field, consequences of wide-ranging import [and] can be defined as the expression of that social utopia by which the intellectuals think of themselves as ‘independent,’ ‘autonomous’” (114). However, we can concede this reality and still endeavor to enact counterhegemonic education, and do so with the conviction that such efforts contribute to more just social relations.

Throughout his astoundingly productive career, San Juan has unmasked how the intelligentsia becomes imbricated in the abuses of capitalism, colonialism, and racism, and demanded that those in the privileged space of the academy acknowledge and address ever-increasing inequality. He has dissected the theories
and methodologies deployed in pedagogy and scholarship at different historical moments and has shown how issues of class, political economy, and (internal and international) colonialism become abstract and immaterial in the hands of intellectuals, even those who proclaim alliance with the wretched of the earth. For our purposes, his works in the last 20 years, particularly *Racism and Cultural Studies* (2002) and recent articles, books and interviews (just a portion of San Juan’s political and creative corpus), best allow us to address the current state of our field.

Within the boundaries of their disciplines and academic sites, professors may espouse radical perspectives, teach Karl Marx and Angela Davis, and encourage, even participate in, counterhegemonic activism. An adage maintains that while graduate students and untenured faculty often protest injustices in the university, by the time tenure arrives, most are too comfortable to question their own complicity in capitalism’s neoliberal ideological apparatus. Unfortunately, this maxim is often proven true; worse, many academics produce scholarship that contributes to the obfuscation of the real costs of capitalism, racism, poverty, war, and the dilution of an adequate response to these conditions by students and faculty.

When students are asked to read the trenchant critiques by Marxists and anticolonialist activists and theorists such as Antonio Gramsci and Frantz Fanon, their insights are firmly situated in the past, rather than as a means to understand present events or social systems. Much is at stake in these seemingly esoteric debates over the content and processes of knowledge production; students come to universities and have their assumptions and positions challenged, and often they undergo powerful transformations. These students arrive from all over the world and economic spectrum with vastly divergent experiences. Through their professors and textbooks, students absorb trends in scholarship and form their own commitments based on curriculum and their own experiences. In order to succeed—with good grades and letters of recommendation to graduate school—in the institution that supports the intelligentsia, students must first buy into their professor’s beliefs and preferences, and in so doing, many lose their genuine, organic understandings of their own experiences. Students committed to justice are thus encouraged to emulate their professors in locating agency and activism in quotidian resistance as meaningful political action.

In addition to his critique of a haphazard intersectionality (examined more closely below), which in San Juan’s opinion has been the “most entrenched” method of diverting from engaging capitalism, he also brings to light other trends in the academy and their impact: “new digital humanities, post humanist, ecological or green theory, trauma studies—all these are novel or fashionable trends designed to attract students or refurbish the old offerings. But they are all individualist in their thinking, metaphysically idealist in divorcing form/themes from social and
political contexts” (Correspondence). Here, San Juan highlights the results of the shift from social movement, class and anti-racist struggle-informed teaching, scholarship, and community-based learning practices to a disengaged intellectual work on symptoms of exploitation.

San Juan had recognized and resisted in his work and his teaching the direction of this process—the move from an activist-based curricula and scholarship to a culturalist, discursive, apolitical project—for some time. In *Racism and Cultural Studies*, San Juan notes that Ethnic Studies “depends chiefly on the sense of the responsibility of ‘organic intellectuals’ to their communities. Everyone recognizes that this discipline would not have been possible without the radical democratic engagements of women, youth, people of color in ‘internal colonies’ and overseas dependencies” (135). This is far from the prevailing conception of Ethnic Studies as described by Evelyn Hu DeHart: “to recover and reconstruct the histories of those Americans whom history has neglected; to identify and credit their contributions to the making of U.S. society and culture, to chronicle protest and resistance, establish alternative values and visions, and institutions and cultures” (52). San Juan’s critical and trenchant appraisal is also applicable to the field of American Studies, demonstrating the tensions between such forces wherein “American Studies is less captivated by the canonical masters” and operates instead with “concessions to deconstruction, feminists, polite ethnic readers” (Correspondence).

For full disclosure, both authors were privileged to have San Juan on our thesis (Peterson) and dissertation (Wendland) committees, and also to work with him as he became director of Comparative American Cultures (CAC) that he quickly turned into a radical site where students were tangibly empowered because he included their voice in hiring, pedagogy, and curricular decisions. Thus we witnessed him transform a fledgling program into a site for radical pedagogy and student activism. Given our location in Washington State, many undocumented students found their place in CAC, and students of color from across the campus took part in its radical curriculum and the opportunities it offered for direct involvement with the program’s pedagogical directions and administration as well as local political issues. All instructors met regularly to discuss our methods and the challenges we faced, and we both benefitted invaluably from the experience of working with San Juan as scholars and teachers. Significantly, San Juan’s frequent references to the power of textbooks was shown between 1998–2001; we used Takaki’s *A Different Mirror*, a book selected because it emphasized moments of collective resistance and exposed how capitalist exploitation through ethnicity and race was the spine to the United States’ power. The introductory course illustrated San Juan’s goal to “engag[e] in teaching and research into immigration, slavery, colonial conquest, capitalism, postcoloniality and identity, sovereignty, struggles and globalization in its cultural, economic, and technological contexts” (*Racism* 129). Thus San Juan’s
interventions in Ethnic Studies have been immeasurable, and he has participated in such interdisciplinary, intersectional efforts in his own copious works.

No other department at the institution we attended or were employed by has accomplished the dialogue and vested presence of a committed cohort of dozens of marginalized students joined together by San Juan’s vision and leadership. However, this is as much a statement about the difficulties of Ethnic and Cultural Studies programs; as San Juan explains, the impact of Ethnic Studies being founded in “the fury of emergencies, in the fires of urban rebellions and national liberation struggles inscribed within living memory, has marked [Ethnic Studies] character and destiny for better or worse” (Racism 134).

REDEFINING RESISTANCE—NEW DIVERSIONS

In explaining the reasons why academics concerned with matrices of oppression tend to avoid capitalism and class relations, San Juan states that “when class is used, so deeply is the ideological praxis of being personally responsible, personal guilt or personal advantage/disadvantage is always at stake” (Correspondence). We would go further to say that many people avoid recognizing the most essential component of class, which according to San Juan is “the division of intellectual and manual labor. That’s the origin. Everything is done to conceal it, and ignore it. People are uncomfortable because as a private individual you cannot change class divisions. That’s a political problem, and the response should be organized group actions and demands.” Further, San Juan argues, class is viewed in a “very narrow crude way. Class really refers to social relations, everyday life, as experienced in a market-dominated or market-organized society. Perhaps the avoidance of ‘class’ and the use of groups in a neutral Weberian way may solve the Cold War hangover. But [the Occupy movement] has aroused the public into thinking about the great divide between the 99% and the 1% and if that isn’t class, I don’t know what it is” (Correspondence). Indeed, individualized experiences are emphasized as the true site of social life and reality.

The celebration of the quotidian is achieved through a pluralist intersectional approach that obscures labor and the vagaries of capitalism as they are inflicted on individuals in all areas of identity and experience. For example, recent studies of the Jim Crow era in the U.S. (1890s to the 1960s) tend to obscure how the hegemony of white supremacist capitalism necessitated such a code. Explications of the popular culture of the era fetishize films like The Help, a popular choice for diversity classes, where personal vengeance and social revolution could be served in a feces pie (as in the popular movie does Minny Jackson, the maid to a wealthy white socialite, in
retaliation for being fired and for years of slights), and the racialized class location of domestic servants shown as merely personal indignities or microaggressions, such as having to use a separate bathroom, and these are recognized as little more than illiberal contradictions within an otherwise just society. The South’s system of racial segregation as a mode of systematically dehumanizing an entire people in order to control their bodies and labor remains untouched, as does current treatment of servants, often from Central America, the Caribbean, or other colonized peripheral nations. Indeed, today one can easily purchase a domestic worker from the Philippines, for example in MaidProvider.ph, where special mention is made that “nannies (yayas), drivers and other kasambahays” are available on the site’s main page.

In The Help, we see the superstructural, painful, deadly practices of apartheid as cultural studies, not embedded in an internal colony of African Americans in the South. Safely lodged in the past, the Jim Crow system of exploited racialized labor bears no similarity in the mind of modern academics to global exploitation of colonized or formerly colonized people. This sin of omission helps to obscure the central commonality of systemic exploitation and oppression. As San Juan explains in Beyond Postcolonialism the concept of internal colonialism always demonstrates the “constitutive linkage established between the periphery and metropolis” (156). He reveals that internal colonialism as a mode of analyzing social relations in a particular place like the U.S. “helps us understand the dynamics of the new racial politics of fragmentation, ethnic absolutism, and neoliberal individualism” (156). In other words, the concept of internal colonialism can be used to reveal international systemic linkages as well as the ideologies that work to mystify those structural relations.

Discussions of popular films animate classrooms, and can serve as a bridge into more difficult questions of internal colonialism, namely, how capitalism has always reduced the capacity for emancipation by providing individualistic, often nonverbal outlets for anger and by confining discussions of racialized class exploitation in the realm of gestures through steady consumption of mystifying scholarship and exploitation in microaggressions. These conversations, however, tend to silence students; discussions of child labor, corporate profit, and consumerism or the contemporary enslavement of women in particular as domestic workers are discomfiting, epically after the play in The Help on the verbal slur “eat shit.” When the material conditions that were a nostalgic backdrop to these actions are uncovered, we find the servants internally colonized, and dependent on a white missionary to translate their experiences and circumscribe their agency.
A similar focus on the despatialized quotidian emerges in a new study of Mississippi in the mid-20th century, *The Jim Crow Routine*. In it, historian Stephen A. Berry’s work offers a unique scholarly example for understanding San Juan’s research agenda and critiques of contemporary cultural studies. Generally, Berry’s thesis aims to show how white and Black people performed Jim Crow as a system of racial supremacy in Mississippi. With a threat of violence and coercion looming, he shows with tremendous detail how “[r]emaining faithful to Jim Crow meant acting—performing with the body and the voice—in a predictable way on this racial stage” (35). Berry’s study of the quotidian interracial experiences of Blacks and whites in elevators, on sidewalks, in stores and waiting rooms, in schools, on buses, and private homes could elicit suspicions of what San Juan dismisses as a celebration of the “carnivalesque” or the equalizing power of play and difference embedded in “a cult of the vernacular,” an aestheticization of routine action as rebellion by postmodernist theory (*Racism* 221, 225). This kind of theoretical approach to daily activities might be accused of imagining or manufacturing “a reservoir of choices that does not exist for most colonized subject” (*After Post-colonialism* 56)—which, for San Juan, includes internally colonized African-descended people.

Many academics vacillate, San Juan shows, between the poles of this playful orientation and the more conventionally serious instrumental empiricism. If Berry is attempting to produce what San Juan calls a “thick history” that brings to light the “multiplicity of determinants” (*In the Wake of Terror* 26) of Jim Crow as a racial system of white supremacy, the study of the former encounters a number of limits. Throughout his career, San Juan has worked to develop a theoretical conceptualization of the race-class dialectic as the production of a systematized imbalance of power based on physical appearance and national origin that constituted the European colonial project (*Racial Formation* 57; *In the Wake of Terror* 34). Race and racism—distinct from ethnicity or ethnicization—are produced “in a field of warring material forces where ethnicity becomes racialized in the struggle for collective rights and political power” (*Hegemony* 240). Racial identity exists apart from rational choice or presumed individualism; rather, it is implicated in the struggle for hegemony, the production and reproduction of a social division of labor within the perpetually crisis-ridden world of the capitalist system. In contrast to the conservative economic/political theory that insists that the serial collection of individual choices and wills produces a rational social order, this component of the race/class dialectic may seem obvious, and certainly fuels Berry’s work—at least by implication. His individual actors are shaped and constituted by a racial system of white supremacy—even if they possess the power to choose and often resist the “expected script.” Indeed, Berry’s work catalogues Mississippi’s narratives.
of resistance, or what San Juan calls “popular memory”—the collection of actions taken against “racist, patriarchal, and exploitative forces” (*Racial Formation* 77). In this, the cosmetic activism in *The Help*, also set in the South, is replicated through anecdotes and unexamined intersections.

Another component of San Juan’s analysis, however, is the fact that ruling class power in the U.S. had/has been “constructed on the articulation of race through the production of subjects inscribed in racist discursive/institutional practices” (*Racial Formation* 57). Even more, “race relations and race conflict are necessarily structured by the larger totality of the political economy of a given society, as well as modifications in the structure of the world economy” (*In the Wake of Terror* 36). Thus, a “thick history” of Jim Crow should sketch a research agenda that details the connections to the many sides of this totality—the historical and the spatial. In conjunction with the conventions of his scholarly craft, Berry trains his eye primarily on Mississippi (with some global shoutouts) (206–217), the time period of his study (other than a brief foray into the present), and closes with a single sparse reference to the economic determinants of the totality he partially delineates. Civil rights reforms resulting from Black resistance, he notes, “did not address economic inequalities, and they depended on imagining racism as overt and visually horrific, as specific actions committed by individuals rather than as the by-products of a larger political and economic system” (Berry 223). No discussion of “the capitalist logic of racial categorization of labor power—the reification of the bodies of peoples of color” (*Racial Formation* 95).

In addition to this point of origin (rearticulated on a regular basis), San Juan has systematically shown how racism operates on an ideological level in the production of national mythology: individualism, diversity/supremacy, exceptionalism, etc. (*In the Wake of Terror* 38). “I submit racism is an ideological symptom of the general logic of capitalist rule,” he writes, and far from reducing racism to the economic, San Juan’s formula “locates it within the political economy of social practices and ideological-cultural moments in a specific nation-state formation within which it acquires its efficacy and concrete . . . historicity” (*After Post-colonialism* 47).

**DISCIPLINES AND CONFERENCES**

Over the past three decades or so, San Juan has aimed his prodigious intellect at critiquing the disciplines for which he has taught and produced scholarship. The direction of American Studies (2004), Ethnic Studies (1992), and Cultural Studies (2002) has produced the possibility for this conventional lapse on Berry’s part. San Juan argues that the trap between the poles of postmodern “rhetorical gestures”
and instrumental empiricism has blocked the academy’s ability to produce viable interventions. For example, American Studies has fundamentally lacked a critique of existing exploitative social relations. While not all forms and systems of oppression are fully or adequately addressed with an analysis of “the social division of labor as constitutive of social relations, not just an effect of status or roles . . . leaves out a formative element of existing reality” (Working through the Contradictions 63). Of course, the original (and continuing) role of American Studies in the production of a false benign image of the U.S. (rather than a genocidal, war-like, and imperialist power) lies at the formation and instruments of the field. As San Juan puts it, “go to the root: the division of intellectual and manual labor . . . Everything is done to conceal it, mystify it, ignore it.” He concludes, “until we have another big wave of protests—like the Civil Rights struggles, the OCCUPY WALL STREET movement, etc. the academy won’t change” (Correspondence).

San Juan’s critique of these academic fields resonates with Paul Lauter’s question—“What difference did differences make?”—asked after his publication of literature from marginalized populations, such as women, minorities, and the internally colonized. However, this contradiction is unsatisfactorily resolved in Lauter and others who embrace hybridity and global identities, the central agenda of the turn to culturalism in the U.S.-based academy since the 1990s. Instead of offering students insights and resources for the praxis of anticolonial scholarship in ways that actually limit the power of U.S. “global minotaur” (Varoufakis), radical academics frequently celebrate a diversity of voices without centering it in “the matrix of imperialist globalization” (Working through the Contradictions 50). Again, San Juan points to the importance of textbooks, such as Takaki’s A Different Mirror, perhaps the most tangible relic of the culture wars, in shaping the perspectives and politics of college students. However, a disciplinary and bureaucratic push for professional self-interest and the urge for conformity displace this difficult and endangering work.

San Juan frequently invokes experiences at academic conferences to countenance his critique regarding the myopic postal world of the ivory tower. San Juan forcefully argues that postcolonial theory is unable to address real conditions in places such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and is thus “useless for any emancipatory politics” and its mystification of these material conditions becomes “an academic exercise to advance careers” (“Reflections” 11). The 2012 American Studies Association meeting on “Dimensions of Empire and Resistance: Past Present and Future” held in San Juan Puerto Rico with accommodations at a posh resort was especially exemplary. The conference proceedings featured a handful of presentations on Puerto Rico, or the experience of Puerto Rican migrants. Shuttled between the private beach resort and the conference sites, within walking distance of the city’s tourist attractions, participants enacted a disturbing performativity of colonialism.
Organizers duly noted this incongruity, by specifically soliciting papers examining colonialism and forms of resistance, often quotidian and located in popular culture. Such spatial and material disjuncture bespeaks the quandary of the Gramscian intellectual “functionary,” playing a role with the knowing wink asserting one’s “autonomous” status (Gramsci 114).

San Juan discovers an origin of this symptom within the historical development of Cultural Studies as a field. In his excavation of the direction of Cultural Studies since its formation in British academy by Williams and his cohorts, San Juan shows that while the former sought to develop cultural materialism to connect his studies of everyday life to political and economic realities which textured lived experience, the culturalist problematic produced the conditions of the demise of the materialist component (Racism 209–226). The culturalist problematic promoted a static contradiction between individual consciousness and agency (as in Berry) and objective social relations. And when the close of the 20th century and the emergence of a hegemonic “there is no alternative” to capitalism ethos saw the convenient dismissal of historical materialism as mere economism or reductivism, Williams’s urge to dialectically link the two poles of individual and collective vanished as well. Above all, academic disciplines must be able to answer this question: “[C]an the new prophetic ‘desire’ of Cultural Studies protect us from the barbarism of the market and the profit-obsessed culture/information industry?” (Racism 202). In his view, cultural studies, shorn of historical materialism, cannot protect capitalism’s victims.

Some of the theoretical and practical problems enumerated in this paper are also exemplified by a recent experience at the University of Michigan’s Intergroup Dialogue Institute. The institute is a four-day program hosted by UM’s Program for Intergroup Dialogue for faculty and staff from institutions around the U.S. to familiarize them with the academic program, its scholarly research, and to components of the classroom experiences. Without going into extensive detail, it was clear that the central focus of the program, its courses, and the institute itself lay on personal experiences of non-hierarchized social identities (e.g. race, class, body size, national origin, gender identity, ability) in relation to others, to larger social institutions, and to global processes (Maxwell, Chesler, and Nagda 163). The program asks participants to connect in confidential and vulnerable spaces their personal experiences to the systemic and to collective efforts for social change, yet it explicitly denounces political or radical agendas that will thwart the dialogic process. Following the institute, one participant stated that the experience reminded them of therapy.

Clearly, the proceedings were marked with some persistent problems, which San Juan has been highlighting, critiquing, and deconstructing for the past three
decades and more. The program’s facilitators and teachers insist that social identities are organized within a field of identities. They admit that a dialogic method of engagement can produce a space within such a field of relations between oppressor and oppressed can be normalized or made to seem immutable, and confess that their otherwise extensive research on the impact of dialogic courses on university students has failed to examine this particular stressing concern.1 And while intersectionality is emphasized on the personal level, i.e., we all exist and live at the intersections of our social identities, the intersection of systems seems under-theorized. For example, social class (referred to as “classism” or SES in shorthand) is described and performed as a social identity, like body size. Students and participants are encouraged to talk about how prejudices against rich people are not unlike prejudices against working-class people. Such a reduction of class to the realm of personal experience and to identity relocates the discussion outside the social formation of capitalism as a wealth-extracting system of labor exploitation with a particular history of genocide and racial slavery and a present of racial-colonial project of super-exploitation.

In workshops discussing individualized experiences with class, SES served as the operative verbiage. This convenient substitution demonstrates San Juan’s observation that class is often neutralized by redefining it, whereby it becomes:

status, life-style, even an entire “habitus” or pattern of behavior removed from the totality of the social relations of production in any given historical formations ... Often, class is reduced to income, or to voting preference within the strict limits of the bourgeois (that is, capitalist) electoral order. Some sociologists even play at being agnostic or nominalist by claiming that class displays countless meanings and designations relative to the ideological persuasion of the theorist/researcher, hence its general uselessness as an analytic tool. This has become the orthodox view of “class” in mainstream academic discourse. (In the Wake of Terror 23)

San Juan has resisted such trends since the early 1990s and identified its origins in the work of social democrats like Chantal Mouffe. Mouffe, he shows, argued for a principle of ideological hegemony that created a “chain of equivalence” of social identities around which the principle struggle is discursive (Racial Formation 54; Racism 218). The “backpack” metaphor (McIntosh) and the “koosh ball” metaphor (Wildman and Davis) for understanding identities in a field of equivalence serve as examples of contemporary U.S. conceptualizations of Mouffe’s theoretical positions.

We do not want to simply dismiss the work of the UM program. Evidently, materialist demands for structural and real-world interventions have influenced the development of the program. Discussions that pair personal experience with social
systems and advocacy for progressive social change have pedagogical value. And certainly specific outcomes in any dialogue will be contingent on the topic, quality of facilitation, and the particulars of the community intervention completed. For example, if a dialogue on body size leads to a greater understanding of, or activism around the political economy of racially-linked “food deserts,” deregulation of food production, intensified centralization of food production in the hands of a few powerful corporations, the lack of effective healthcare access, the contradiction inherent in the manufacture of cheap unhealthy foods as against expensive organics, global struggles against the imbalance of a system that produces enough food for the entire world’s population while billions regularly starve, in addition to programs encouraging health and wellness and interpersonal sensitivity about fashion, body image, and self-esteem, then the dialogue works well.

The patterns of these latter components, however, as San Juan has repeatedly shown, hold sway in U.S. academic circles. The identification of social identities in a “chain of equivalence” such as this—often articulated as intersectionality (Aguilar; Carbado; Yuval-Davis)—operationalizing a notion of class as mere identity, limits such a hypothetical dialogue to a mystification of class and the emphasis on what San Juan calls “the pluralist allure of the commodity-fetish” (*Working through the Contradictions* 61). When such performance of social identity and its connection to social systems are separated out of social class, the result is the production of a politically-correct consumption model as social activism: which are the right shoes to purchase, the correct foods, recyclable paper materials, organic weed killers, the right TV shows and movies to watch, etc. As San Juan poignantly shows: “cash registers ring merrily while service workers in hotels, restaurants, and carnival grounds sweat it out for corporate capital and its instrumentalities to reproduce themselves and, with it, the unequal division of labor and theft of social wealth amassed on the damaged bodies of millions of workers, peasants, women, and children around the world” (*Racism* 225). The central features of class, the exploitation of labor, the organization of bodies, the production of regimes of control, and the illusions of scholarly production fade from view.

Social class shapes experiences of individuals and communities. Individuals negotiate interactions in the world through lenses of social class, and differences of social class cannot and should not be normalized and reified, as indicated in the chain of equivalence model. Groups and communities experience race, social class, gender, gender identity, and sexuality through the historically and spatially constituted structure of their position within a social division of labor (hooks). San Juan argues, more deeply, it is “incorrect to conceive of class as a bounded social identity endowed with a specific agency divorced from its place in the production process and the social division of labor” (*In the Wake of Terror* 31). Resisting the urge to reduce class to the economic determinant of social conditions, San Juan defines
class as more than the mere relationship of a person or group of people to the means of production. In an inherently antagonistic system of overdetermined (and non-hierarchical) cycle of production and reproduction where value produced is extracted by capital owners, struggle constitutes class (29). Beyond the production of social identity, race operates in conjunction with class. They are “dialectically conjoined,” San Juan writes, “in the reproduction of capitalist relations of exploitation and domination” (34). Class cannot be reduced to ethnicity or culture (or some version of identity) as indicated in the UM model or its performance as in Berry’s study.

INTERSECTIONS WITHOUT CLASS

Despite a risk of obvious oversimplification, we propose that there are two main splits in the proponents of the theory and practice of intersectionality, and a third potentially liberationist model. First, the dominant trend is exerted through the chain of equivalence model outlined above. Conversations about this model collapse systems into social identities, bounded and equated. The biggest outcomes of programs like Michigan’s Intergroup Dialogues and University of Illinois’ Intersections—both of which emphasize non-hierarchical dialogue and intersectionality of social identities—is that student participants report higher rates of sensitivity or empathy for diversity and a greater comfort with cross-cultural interactions (Aber et al. 191). Perhaps there is real learning, but the result is that teachers and scholars who emulate such models of intersectionality do not have to implicate the system in order to feel radical.

Kathy Davis’s excavation of the theoretical permutations of the intersectionality model in contemporary cultural studies scholarship reveals the extent of this intentional disconnect between individual and system (Aguilar). In a 2008 essay, claiming the political and intellectual roots of Combahee River Collective and Crenshaw and Collins, Davis argued that intersectionality’s persistence in social theory results from the fact that it has a little something for everyone. It allows for an “acknowledgement of difference” that paves a way for “exploring the interactions of race, class and gender” (K. Davis 70–71). Note: exploration not resistance, subversion, opposition, or dismantling. It appeases the tension between particularity and universality (72). It provides an “exciting,” “new twist” for postmodernists stymied by the inability to connect theory to material reality (73–74). Its great strength is that it remains ill-defined, contested, or open, thus ensuring its appeal to multiple audiences (re: ideological orientations). Aguilar assesses Davis’ playful celebration of the model as the movement “to the realm of discourse with less and less material anchor” (Aguilar).
By contrast, a second trend exists, currently part of a fundamental disagreement about intersectionality. One element refuses pure equivalence within a social matrix of oppression. In his 2013 essay “Colorblind Intersectionality,” Devon Carbado likewise rooted his understanding of intersectionality in the political and theoretical work of the same sources. However, he emphasized what we see as the “standpoint” concept (Collins) to critique the chain of equivalence model, specifically with regard to how race, gender, gender identity, and sexuality are analyzed and deployed in social contexts. He analyzes two court cases involving women fired from their jobs for their refusal to perform gender or racial normativity, as well as the 1990s campaign against “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” He concludes that a chain of equivalence model erases the specificity of the experiences of African American men and women, straight or queer, gender conforming or non-conforming. Instead, white supremacy, patriarchy, and notions of gender normativity are simply expanded to accommodate gender and sexual diversity among white people. “Colorblind intersectionality” instead normalizes and naturalizes other hierarchies and inequalities by promoting a mode of assimilation, he concludes (Carbado 836).

This devastating and meticulous critique works for other social identities, like class, he implies. Because his two court cases involved working-class women fired for their failure to perform corporate rules about a racialized and gendered division of exploited labor, Carbado opened the door to such a possible thicker intersectional analysis. Unfortunately, he refused to walk through that door. Legal strategies or social movement rhetoric might have been altered to resist colorblind intersectionality, but without a class critique they break on the dangerous rocks of the same hegemony.

A third front, to which we see San Juan more closely aligned, is represented by Angela Y. Davis who has leveled a critique of these processes by linking such concepts to corporate models of multiculturalism that “rely on a construction of race and gender assimilation that leave existing structures intact” (88). In the context of the Bush administration’s apparently endless war on Afghanistan and Iraq, Davis points to the contradiction of the mass killings of people of color in the Middle East in the name of multiculturalist facades at home. Using an intersectional analysis, Davis shows that the post-9/11 hegemony was established through the production of a multiculturalist allegiance to U.S. patriotism, drenched in a restored patriarchy that pretended to care deeply about the oppression of Afghanistan’s women, founded on masculinist principles of military power. The central dynamo is profit-making and geopolitical power grab, led by IMF and World Bank policies of capitalist austerity and structural adjustment. If a formalist notion of intersecting identities leads us merely to demand equal access into the existing hegemonic framework of power, “dominant culture enlists new sectors to impose itself and perpetuate its ways” (101). The normalization of complicity and consent is achieved once again.
Davis uses intersectional analysis to celebrate the World Social Forum global movement for democracy and social justice that sprang up in the early 2000s to resist IMF/World Bank neoliberalism. That movement, she argues, did not “engage race and gender in isolation from issues of economic democracy and social justice” (103). She continues:

They say that a non-exploitative, non-racist, democratic economic order is possible. They say that new social relations are possible, ones that link human beings around the planet not by the commodities some produce and others consume, but rather by equality and solidarity and cooperation and respect. This, in my opinion, would help to define radical multiculturalism, as opposed to a superficial multiculturalism that simply calls for diversity in the service of exploitation and war. Another world is possible, and despite the hegemony of forces that promote inequality, hierarchy, possessive individualism, and contempt for humanity, I believe that together we can work to create the conditions for radical social transformation. (103)

Pursuing such a line of reason, San Juan likewise argues that a radical intersectional multiculturalism “interrogates and challenges the foundational principles of the social order itself” (Hegemony 257). More recently, in addressing the new trends that achieve similar ends as lingering postalities, San Juan notes that “the subterfuge is that the intersectionality syndrome—race, gender trumps class, although they claim that they are aware of classicism—these intersectionalists claim they are more radical than old-time Marxist approaches” (Correspondence).

CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS

For San Juan, a “world cultural studies” method founded on historical materialism offers important solutions. Textual analysis “to initiate a geopolitical, historically situated reading that would give attention to the sequence of events recounted as well as to the structures underlying them” (Hegemony 250). A world cultural studies approach—embedded in an activist-oriented research agenda defined by an infusion of Marxist categories such as hegemony, capitalism, colonialism, and labor along with popular social movements and collective resistance—would displace bourgeois individualism “in favor of a community, a non-anthropomorphic ecosystem, which subtends the occasion of textual rendering” (251). This model sees cultural production as “embedded in the intertextual field across national boundaries, in a network of affiliations, in a configuration of complicitous discursive formations that migrate or travel around the planet” (252). Such readings connect the struggle for hegemony in a given space, nation-state, or region with world capitalist processes. Thus, texts become “part of a larger historical Imaginary” (253).
In this model, instead of mere isolated creative work or academic exercises, the production of texts and their reading transform creator and reader into historical agents implicated in a global system that must be interrogated and resisted.

In an article detailing the role of African American deserters in the Philippine Revolution of 1899, San Juan puts forth a model of solidarity and community. In his conclusion, he links African American internationalism and solidarity with the Philippine struggle for national liberation as a key way to rethink the politics of multiculturalism and intersectionality. Locating his thought firmly in the Marxist tradition, San Juan attributes to Marx a view of human development as “a multilinear process of global emancipation that took into account the intersection of class with race, ethnicity, and nationalism” (“African American Internationalism” 62). Likewise, “Lenin’s multidimensional vision of social transformation coalescing ethnicity, nation and race in both the imperial metropole and the colonized dependency” helped explicate the global meaning of the Philippine revolution (and its failure) along with simultaneous global developments (62). In addition to this Marxist analysis, San Juan attributes to the Philippine struggle an historical specificity “that does not simply mimic a Eurocentric model but articulates the manifold demands of women, indigenous communities, youth, racial/ethnic, and gendered minorities in a new paradigm of radical collective transformation” (62). The political alliance of these local and global communities ensures the possibility of liberation.

In the U.S. the formation of such communities may necessarily involve the academy in its most radicalized edges. San Juan emphasizes the role of the academy, and the power of curriculum and representation. As students struggle with new contradictions, conflicting loyalties, insecurity, and anxiety over their relationship to the institution, they also must internalize the professor’s interpretations of course material to do well in a given course. Hence students absorb “the history textbook’s portrayal of the submissive and silent victim of imperial conquest” (“Reflections” 8). In opposition to constructions of enervated individuals, the concepts of a “reciprocal or mutual co- or inter-determination” occupy postcolonial theorists searching for examples of agency that also partially exculpate the oppressor. This approach is used in history classes that provide students an etymology and sense of solidarity with fellow students as they memorize and discuss their teacher’s curricular choices and goals.

San Juan has taught us that the possibilities for activism are abundant, even if the means of distraction are equally present. With the recession, movements such as Occupy and Black Lives Matter, 14 years of anti-war struggle, marriage equality and transgender movements, immigrants’ rights advocacy, and the increased visibility and information on the Internet seem to demand change. Thus, possibly
oppositional potential can return to cultural studies, ethnic studies or American Studies as professors and schools are forced to respond to their students’ confusion and growing alienation. It would seem unnecessary to declare that abundance of bodies killed or infirmed by racism, poverty, war, heterosexism, systematic and police violence; in short the violence of capitalism has surely reached a level where contradictions and fissures are beyond mystification. He declaims:

Do not fence yourself off from the everyday lives of ordinary people, workers, students, etc. In the Philippines and in all poor underdeveloped countries, only the very wealthy can insulate themselves from daily struggles for food, clothing, shelter, medical care, etc. Here in the US there are layers of distractions, etc. Also the familial and traditional networks in the impoverished societies prevent or erode fetishisms and mystifications easily, although this does not mean that you don’t find the most avid white supremacists or worshippers of U.S./European cultural superiority in the Philippines and elsewhere. However, the plight of the majority of peoples in Africa, Latin America and the poorer societies in Asia (the Philippines, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia with over a hundred million people, etc.) militate against becoming easy and permanent prey to the “American Dream of Success” whether voiced by Obama, Clinton, or Bill Gates. (Correspondence)
Note

1. According to the Institute organizers, the question of normalization arose as a result of the BDS movement’s critique of the Israeli-Palestinian dialogues hosted by the program but extends to other frequently organized dialogues.
Works Cited


—. Correspondence with authors. 7 June 2015. TS.


