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STEPPING FORWARD, STEPPING BACK, AND INTO THE UNKNOWN: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF SOLIDARITY

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STEPPING FORWARD, STEPPING BACK, AND INTO THE UNKNOWN: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF SOLIDARITY

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Abstract

My social position emerges from years of activism and a rural, working-class history. For decades, I have worked in adult/lifelong learning and development—inside communities and post-secondary institutions—always with the goal of achieving a more just and equitable world. While I aspire to these ideals, I have also had to learn that acts of solidarity involve learning when to step forward and when to step back, and a willingness to step into the unknown. In this autoethnography I choose a few examples from life experience that illustrate solidarity in action and what might be termed revolutionary praxis. Using examples from my work in global/international development, settler-Indigenous relations, feminism, and public transportation, I explore activism and solidarity. Finally, I offer insights into how solidarity functions in spaces of adult learning, including attention to paradoxes or attempting to "do good" while reinforcing inequalities embedded in neoliberal funding, social histories, and authority structures. Positions of solidarity require deep levels of consciousness raising. In my experience, no transformation is without challenges, risk, and acts of courage.

Résumé

Ma position sociale émerge de nombreuses années de militantisme et d'origines rurales et de classe ouvrière. Depuis des décennies, je travaille dans le domaine de l'apprentissage continu et du développement des adultes – au sein de communautés et d'établissements postsecondaires – toujours avec l'objectif de rendre le monde plus juste et plus équitable. Bien que j'aspire à ces idéaux, j'ai aussi dû apprendre que les gestes de solidarité exigent d'apprendre quand aller vers l'avant, quand aller vers l'arrière et quand accepter de se lancer vers l'inconnu. Dans cette auto-ethnographie, je choisis quelques exemples de mes expériences de vie qui représentent la solidarité en action et ce qu'on pourrait nommer la praxis révolutionnaire. À l'aide d'exemples de mon travail dans les domaines du développement mondial/international, des relations colonisateurs-autochtones, du féminisme et des transports publics, j'explore le militantisme et la solidarité. Enfin, j'offre des réflexions sur le fonctionnement de la

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solidarité dans les lieux d'apprentissage des adultes, notamment en ce qui concerne les paradoxes ou les tentatives de « faire du bien », tout en renforçant les inégalités qui imprègnent le financement néolibéral, les histoires sociales et les structures d'autorité. Les positions de solidarité exigent un haut niveau de sensibilisation. Selon mon expérience, aucune transformation ne se fait sans défis, sans risque ou sans actes de courage.

Keywords

Solidarity, activism, feminism, Indigenous, Paulo Freire

> [Acts of activism live] in the creation of the next moment, the next step into the not yet known. (Gale & Wyatt, 2019)

The story of my life of activism, solidarity, and community engagement is guided by praxis from within social justice movements and emancipatory education, including processes that unsettle settler-colonial relationships. I acknowledge that my world of solidarity and activism was heavily influenced by the pedagogies of Paulo Freire; by feminists like Patti Lather, bell hooks, and Judith Butler; by decolonizing practices of Indigenous scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Patricia Monture; and by the music of folk festivals and dialogues with colleagues and friends. Finally, I learned much from the work of popular and adult educators in diverse non-formal contexts. Like other social justice educators, I worked in adult education and development—inside communities locally and globally, and in post-secondary institutions—always with the goal of achieving a more just and equitable world. The integration of these ideas into my lived experience worked to form what in the 1980s we might have called a revolutionary praxis—a praxis guided by solidarity.

Influence of Freire

More than a century after his birth, the words and work of the emancipatory educator and critical theorist Paulo Freire continue to resonate throughout the world. Freire spoke of solidarity as the partner of a critical mind (Freire et. al., 2009/2014). In other words, they co-exist and are connected—*covivencia*. He also posited that solidarity does not happen without effort and conviction (Freire et al, 2009/2014). Freire spoke about the importance of having people name the world, read the world; through this process they come to understand their position in it. It was by learning about Freire that my critical consciousness and passion for acting on knowledge were ignited. This was a process of conscientization—a process through which I understood that my role as an educator was linked to a path of critical engagement for social change. My story of working with Freirean ideas began by reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1968/2000) and then describing it to the class.[1] Learning about Freire may have been the hook that eventually brought me back to adult education.

1 The course was in educational foundations at the University of Saskatchewan. This realization reminded me that one individual can make a significant difference in the lives of many, and reminded me of the importance of choices by educators in terms of curriculum and pedagogy.

I grew up in a rural, working-class family. My earliest memories of activism are of my mother advocating for her three girls to take "shop" instead of home economics. When we were in our teens, our mom went back to university, and rumours circulated in our village that she must be having an affair. Pressures like this on women seeking knowledge and expanded possibilities continue in many places today. In my teens, I attended the Co-operative Youth Program in Saskatchewan, and later, when I was at university, I got involved in solidarity movements with Latin America, primarily Chile, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. While others were learning "Una cerveza, por favor" (a beer, please), my first words in Spanish were the chant "El pueblo unido jamás será vencido" (the people united will never be defeated). I learned early on that when we understand principles of co-operation, community, and social justice, we do not just accept the way things are; we work to eliminate injustice or inequality. Grassroots and social movements, whether labour, agrarian, international, environmental, Indigenous, or feminist, continue to inspire me. Now, with over four decades of activism under my belt, I speak from a position of privilege, but my goal in writing this paper is to explore how a lifelong retrospect on community-engaged activist work provides examples of learning how to embrace Freire's idea that "keeping hope alive is a revolutionary act." Hope, in this sense, moves beyond words. It embraces collective actions.

Autoethnographic Research

Autoethnography provides a research methodology that draws on an author's own experience in order to understand a phenomenon (White, 2010). In the case of this paper, I draw on my experiences of becoming and being an activist to understand how activism and solidarity are understood and lived out. Autoethnography involves a reflexive practice of looking at who we are (including our thoughts and feelings) and how that identity engages and interacts with relationships, communities, places, and cultures (Adams et al., 2015; Johnson, 2019). Just as Johnson (2019) spoke about unsettling experiences in her analysis of how examining Cree artist Kent Monkman's exhibition *Shame and Prejudice* worked to dismantle her own settler position, I attempt to share how key experiences in my life, most involving some aspect of adult education, motivated, grounded, and provided me with convictions that moved toward acts of activism, solidarity, and movement-building. [2]Ellis et al. (2010) wrote that autoethnography involves both recalling an experience and analyzing it—"A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product" (para 1). My autoethnography process began with a co-construction of stories from memory—co-constructed through conversations with my partner. I then used autobiographical reconstruction and document analysis, including of past articles, reports, and Internet sites, to assimilate the data relevant for the writing and analysis of this work.

Setting the Stage: Roots Are Important

My first reaction to the suggestion I write a paper on activism and solidarity using autoethnography was "What can I contribute?" Then I reflected on the last few days. I am

2 In social movements, efforts are constantly required to build and sustain the work aimed at social change. Tools for building groups and social movements are available online (for example, see Everyday Activism Network, 2021) and through many organizations.

communicating with Palestinians living in exile. They are thanking me for showing up at a rally and for joining their group on social media. I know doing this was important, but I remain curious—how does my story contribute to understanding activism? Solidarity? I hold many memories of global activism—lifelong, local, and global, from feminist activism to work with mothers on social assistance to international solidarity. These experiences may resonate with others and inform collective memory. Collective memories are built through social memories where groups of people share a circumstance or domain of interest with each other (Halbwachs, 1952 and 1941/1992). Collective memories have the potential to inform or disrupt official or dominant public history. To some degree, adult education is built on collective memories of social justice learning. As you read, I ask that you reflect on your own memories of activism and influences. How do memories arising from the life experiences discussed in this paper inform or disrupt your own? How does the activism of one inform the activism of many?

Learning from the Co-operative Youth Program

From the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers of the mid-1800s in Great Britain to the Antigonish Movement in rural Nova Scotia, Canada, co-operative education has a long history that is foundational to adult education (Fiagbey, 1992). The Co-operative Youth Program (CYP), offered through the Saskatchewan Co-operative Association, was no exception. It continues to be a historic part of co-operative education, and this education was an early influence on how I understood the world.

> Incorporated as [Saskatchewan Co-operative Association] SCA in 2003, SCA's roots can be traced back to the incorporation of the Co-operative Union of Canada in 1909. The focus of the Co-operative Union of Canada was on federal government relations and international co-op development. In the 1920s, co-operative youth education programming was added to the Union's mandate, and in the late 1950s the Co-operative College of Canada formed. The Co-op College focused on both co-operative education and research. (Saskatchewan Co-operative Association, 2024, para 2)

Through the CYP I learned about co-operatives, shared responsibilities, and shared outcomes. This stands in contrast to the individualized outcomes promoted through neoliberal/austerity state policies and training programs for youth today. The significance of this non-formal lifelong learning was critical, a defining moment in my history of activism. At the CYP we lived together, forming a community, making rules together, and exploring the politics of co-operatives and the province together.

My experience at CYP also alerted me to the critical role of organizing, and to the fact that being together with groups of like-minded people could be transformative. Much later in my life, this idea was a seed for a participatory action research study with the Prairie School for Union Women (PSUW) (see C. Hanson, 2014). I was raised in a rural community, and CYP and PSUW reinforced my awareness of the need for social transformation through community-based research and organizing. Both CYP and PSUW were intensive five-day events that held the capacity to transform individuals through informal adult education programming that included popular education and attention to pedagogies that created change for social justice. My work on two studies showed that the PSUW popular education

and feminist approach was transforming the lives of union women, yet, like other feminist grassroots programs, it went largely unnoticed by anyone outside the labour movement (C. Hanson et al., 2019). As a feminist adult educator, I understood that non-formal learning contributed to the lives of women and communities, so it was important to work with long-time labour activists like Adriane Paavo and Sisters in Labour Education to bring to fruition a book on women's labour education, and we did just that. Our book, *Cracking Labour's Glass Ceiling: Transforming Lives through Women's Labour Education*, was published by Fernwood in 2019.

Activism and Solidarity

I carried the values I learned in CYP into solidarity and activism, locally and globally. The Sandinista popular revolution in Nicaragua provided a global example of social transformation. CYP had helped me understand individual transformation, but by the time I attended university I was ready for more. University taught me that social inequalities have no borders and neither does learning. I engaged in solidarity work with Nicaragua, actions supporting refugees from Chile and Guatemala, and then solidarity work with Indigenous Peoples in Canada. These experiences provoked reflections and learning about colonialism and situated knowledges, while Freire's engagement pedagogy remained ever so relevant.

Tools for Peace and the Nicaragua Support Committee

In 1979, I started classes at the University of Saskatchewan. I saw a sign for an event supporting Nicaragua's newly won Sandinista revolution. Even though I barely knew where Nicaragua was, let alone anything about a revolution, my curiosity was piqued. The Sandinista popular revolution brought about major social and political transformation to the country, such as free health care and education, literacy campaigns using popular education, and women's rights. As a result, it was considered dangerous by capitalist governments that had benefitted from Nicaragua's former status as a puppet regime of the United States.

The Nicaragua Support Committee welcomed me and gave me a place to learn and participate in creating social change. Much of this morphed into work with Tools for Peace (T4P), a pan-Canadian solidarity movement. As long-term scholar activists Lori Hanson and Jonah Walters (2023) wrote,

> T4P was exemplary of the spirit of solidarity in global movement[s] in support of the Sandinista revolution, but also unique in its Canadian-ness, leading us to advocate a definition of international solidarity that emphasizes its situatedness, together with its experiential and affective dimensions. (p. 1)

Our solidarity work, which included hosting coffeehouses, rallies, benefits, speakers, film nights, and workshops, and organizing work brigades, was endless, but nothing could have prepared me for the experiences I had when I visited Nicaragua in 1984. At this time, the U.S. government was supporting opponents of the Nicaraguan popular revolution and waging a war against its Sandinista government. At that time in history, the Sandinistas were known as revolutionaries, and the U.S.-backed war was considered a contrarrevolución (counter-revolution)—or the contra war as it was known colloquially. There was a mixed sense of triumph and fear in various parts of the country.

We entered Nicaragua from Costa Rica in the winter of 1984. Due to contra activity in the region, the border control had moved 2 to 3 km inside the official border. No public transportation operated in the area, so we had to hitchhike from border post to post; a truck owned by the military picked us up. Travelling on the Pan-American Highway was iffy at the time—there were land mines planted along the roads, so on this occasion (and on many others over the course of my visit) we drove fast, intensely aiming not to hit a pothole. We arrived at a checkpoint. The guard checked our visas. The date on my visa looked as though it had been tampered with, so we were turned away. I remember saying, "Pero no soy a contra!" (But I am not a contra). Unable to convince the border guards otherwise, we were forced to re-enter Costa Rica, sort out the visa over a period of two days, and then return to Nicaragua. This time we were successful and travelled north to visit a friend, a Canadian midwife, in the community of Condega.

A couple of weeks later, we left Condega, where refugios (bomb shelters) were common and the contra war was a daily reality. We headed back south to the beach village of San Juan del Sur.[3] Following a nice dinner, we crawled into bed. Hardly asleep, we were awakened by gunfire. We immediately looked for the refugios—there were none. We lay flat on the cement floor in the centre of the hotel as tracers from heavy machine guns raced overhead. We could hear screams, loud noises, and vehicles racing well into the night. We learned the next day that the shooting came from contras in high-speed military boats known as piraña. They were aiming at oil tanks on the hill above the village.

This was my first time in a war zone or armed conflict, but it would not be my last. The experience in Nicaragua impressed on me the courage of Nicaraguans who were fighting for justice, and it reinforced my resolve and commitment to continue doing solidarity work. A decade later, the work took on different forms. I became more involved in doing work with Indigenous Peoples and communities.

Settler Colonialism and Indian Residential Schools

In the early 1990s, while teaching high-school Native [Indigenous] Studies in Brandon, Manitoba, I embraced learning from community leaders, from Elders, and from books. My background was not in Indigenous Studies, and in spite of feelings of imposter syndrome, I justified my involvement because I was a single parent and needed work. The students were mostly Indigenous and came from communities throughout Manitoba. Many had left their home communities to attend secondary schools in the cities—a situation that was seldom discussed, in spite of the fact that it sometimes mirrored the reality faced earlier by their parents, who were forced to leave homes to attend Indian residential schools (IRSs). At that time, and despite the fact that several IRSs were still operating (Miller, 2017), few people were talking about the IRS system or its central role in Canada's genocidal practices. [4]I organized a field trip for my students to visit the former Brandon Indian Residential School. Two of the

3 Ironically, San Juan del Sur is now one of the largest resorts in Nicaragua. Much of it is owned and operated by foreigners, including Canadians. The Nicaraguan revolution was fought in part about foreign control of the country, yet now that is ever present.

4 Indian residential schools, some of which continued operating until 1996, were not recognized as contributing to genocide in Canada until Parliament passed an all-party resolution in 2022.

students later returned to the school and made an award-winning video about it, including information on unmarked graves and the legacy of violence surrounding the school. [5]

Contemporary scholars speak about the role of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) (Canada, 1996) in bringing public awareness of IRSs, but others say it happened later, during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC's) public hearings from 2008 to 2015 (Stanton, 2022). For me, both commissions were significant. In 1992, I learned that the RCAP was coming to Brandon. I felt that my students in Native Studies had something to contribute, so after class I worked with eight students in the bus depot's café (a central location for meeting after school), where we planned our RCAP presentation. I surprisingly found the transcript of that presentation in 2023, while doing research for a book.[6] The discovery of that transcript reminded me again of something I learned in the class where I first encountered Freire's theories—that is, choices made by educators can go a long way in influencing lives. When I discovered that transcript in 2023, I posted a notice on Facebook. Several of the students I had taught in 1992 came forward with memories of the experience. Despite my work on IRSs in the 1990s, it was not until I bore witness to the TRC public hearings, which I attended in Winnipeg, Saskatoon, and Ottawa, that I experienced a critical incident and had a shift in consciousness about residential schools, realizing the importance of open public dialogue about colonialism and Indigenous-settler relations. Witnessing the power of Survivor testimony in both the RCAP and TRC was transformative, yet I was reminded that "much need[ed] to be done to address settler denial" (Regan, 2010, p. 57) and that such learning would take place over the long term.

I continue to be motivated to undertake research on Indian residential schools. I am currently completing a seven-year study on the reparations for serious abuse that occurred in IRSs.[7] My partner is an intergenerational IRS Survivor and storyteller, who worked as an adjudicator and a Survivor/claimant's lawyer in the programs linked to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. His stories from experience shed light on the IRS abuses in such a way that I was unable to reconcile why these stories were not being talked about by a wider audience. I have come to understand that settler-colonial relations can only be changed by reckoning with and confronting the ongoing violence of colonialism, and the responsibility for addressing inequities, dispossession, and genocide involves unsettling my own settlerhood (Elkchirid et al., 2020). I attempt to decolonize my adult education practices, but I recognize that I, like others, often perform in a position that weaves between being a settler, an ally, and a solidarity activist—processes that are never mutually exclusive in theory or practice (C. Hanson, 2020). Certainly, one of the tensions in being an adult educator is navigating the paradoxes we embody—particularly when our work is not just local but also global, as demonstrated in the next example from Ethiopia.

5 In 1993, the video received an award in community programming from Access 12 Communications in Brandon, Manitoba.

6 The record of this presentation is available through Library and Archives of Canada. Our presentation, dated December 10, 1992, begins on page 103. See https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/aboriginal-heritage/royal-commission-aboriginal-peoples/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=67

7 Reparations through the Independent Assessment Process, outlined in the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, began in 2007 and continued to 2021.

Conflict, Social Equality, and Awra Amba, Ethiopia

As mentioned earlier, my experience in Nicaragua was not the only one where I encountered war and conflict. I worked in Nepal and Ethiopia in the early parts of the 2000s. During the Nepali Civil War, I travelled on airplanes with wounded soldiers; in Ethiopia, checkpoints were commonplace in rural Ahmara and later Tigray, both sites of ethnic conflicts. These experiences taught me about privilege because unlike my colleagues, who were nationals from Nepal and Ethiopia respectively, I could likely walk away safely from the conflict. Meanwhile, local populations—some more vulnerable than others—were caught in an ugly web of violence, with conflict often based on class and sometimes ethnicity. In spite of my privilege as a White Westerner, I am still triggered by the sound of guns and military jets. To this day the sound of the Canadian Snowbirds flying overhead is not entertainment for me.[8] I know many people, at home and abroad, who have lived or are living with violence and are triggered by sounds, smells, and feelings. This is seldom discussed in the context of adult learning, yet when we pull these memories together, we challenge fears. I often wonder how people address the adversity and tensions that arise in doing activist work. Perhaps, for many of us, these instances bolster courage and solidify commitment. That commitment can take many forms. For me, a commitment to social equality has always involved a commitment to the goals of feminism using methodologies that attempt to embrace Freire's (1968/2000) ideals of learning and teaching as reciprocal processes.

Between 2004 and 2009, while working for Oxfam Canada as a gender equality advisor on an international development project in Ethiopia, I co-implemented a Training of Trainers (TOT) project on gender mainstreaming and HIV/AIDS. Realizing that a TOT needed to be a sustained project, not a one-off event, our training team created a program that would take two years to complete. The key activity turned out to be not what was done in the classroom, but what happened in the field as participants visited the village of Awra Amba. Awra Amba is an intentional community developed by 18 people and led by an Ethiopian pacifist, Zumra Nuru, an illiterate man who, 50 years after the community's formation, continued to serve as its leader (Nuru, 2024). Crellin (2016) wrote that Awra Amba was difficult to describe, "possibly communist, puritanical, pantheistic, feminist, or even cult-like" (para 2), acknowledging that its 450 residents were unlikely to understand such descriptors. The land base in Ahmara state where Awra Amba is situated is not very fertile and limited in size. The community was founded on principles of gender equality, children's rights, compassion for the elderly, and moral acts of goodness (Nuru, 2024). Unlike other areas of Ethiopia, it is common here to see men carrying water or cooking, women doing manual labour, and all community members participating in weaving—the main income-generating activity. Religion is not promoted; humanity is stressed. I was told the family and community structures are woven together. Families decide which person will take part in which activity, with roles rotating among family members. This includes participation in the village council and in caring for elders. The exercise of taking TOT participants here carried more weight than much of what could be achieved in a classroom.

Awra Amba illustrated to the Ethiopian participants that equality could be applied in their context. It also illustrated how communities often look for examples from the outside, but the hidden gems are often within. While the practices in Awra Amba are not how I personally envision feminism, they do provide an example from the Global South

8 The Snowbirds are a popular aerobatic team of jets flown by Canadian Armed Forces personnel.

that illustrates concrete possibility, hope, and transformation. I had a similar experience working with women on social assistance in Canada, as illustrated in the next example.

Unpaid Work and Feminism

Since my 20s, I have been involved in grassroots feminist organizations, working on reproductive choice legislation, legalizing midwifery, advocating for the recognition of unpaid work, and fighting for universal childcare. A few years ago, I began a two-year term as president of the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW).[9] It was during this tenure that I realized many of the issues we are still fighting for actually came out of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1974.[10] Recognizing how slow change often is, I continue to ask students in my Sociology of Gender and Sexuality course to be critical of the word *progress*. While we have won some battles, new struggles have also emerged.

A struggle that culminated during the COVID-19 pandemic was unpaid caring work. In 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action recognized and documented that the majority of unpaid work in the world was done by women.[11] Canada was no exception. Meanwhile, Marilyn Waring, a feminist, academic, and former parliamentarian in New Zealand, demanded that world accounts become accountable to women. In her seminal book *If Women Counted* (1988), Waring critiqued global economies, noting that they typically devalued work mainly done by women. Quoting Waring, Roberts (2019) wrote,

> The use of gross domestic product as a system "counts oil spills and wars as a contributor to economic growth, while child rearing and housekeeping are deemed valueless." A woman in Africa who toils 18 hours a day on the land and for her family is classed in manmade economics as "unoccupied." Why, Waring asked, does water going through a pipe have a market value but not water carried on a woman's head? (para 13)

My involvement in the fight to have unpaid work valued and counted extended over two decades. It started in 2002, working with feminist groups in Brandon, Manitoba (Annis, 2002), and later, in Saskatoon, working on a community-based study with mothers of small children. These mothers lived on social assistance in a province that had legislation which stated that when children turned two years of age, parents needed to prove they were looking for (paid) work. Using a project advisory committee and creative research methods—such as a 24-hour time-use clock and drawings of a house that demonstrated what factors supported and/or created challenges for unpaid work—we documented the work 28 women living on social assistance were already doing (C. Hanson & Hanson, 2010).

9 CRIAW is Canada's only bilingual, national, feminist organization dedicated to research.

10 The Royal Commission on the Status of Women was created in 1967 and given the mandate to "inquire into and report upon the status of women in Canada, and to recommend what steps might be taken by the federal government to ensure equal opportunities for women in all aspects of the Canadian society" (Government of Canada, 2021).

11 The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was endorsed by 189 countries at the United Nations after the Fourth World Conference on Women. It is still viewed as one of the world's most detailed and progressive blueprints on how to achieve gender equality. For more information see UNWomen.org.

The findings demonstrated that structural inequality is not remedied by neoliberal solutions or low-income jobs.

> According to Waring, job search inevitably shifts the use of resources, such as money and time, which could have been spent on work related to caregiving. In both "Who Benefits" and a similar study in Manitoba, women indicated that children suffer when their mothers are forced to look for paid work as a condition for receiving SA [Social Assistance] benefits (Annis, 2002). Typically, women in "Who Benefits" [the study] noted that if they obtained part-time work, the low wages, lack of supports, and clawbacks often meant any work they did obtain, did not change their financial status. So, although participants abhorred the stigma of being on welfare, they agreed that moving into low-paid jobs did not increase their family's economic security or overall well-being; instead, it placed a huge burden of child welfare concern on mothers. (C. Hanson & L. Hanson, 2010, pp. 193–194)

The action research project resulted in meetings with government, press conferences, and an uptake of recommendations by advisory group organizations. Perhaps the greatest "finding," independent of the research, was that the participants wanted to continue meeting after the study concluded. Thus, the research became a catalyst for bringing people together. This was solidarity in action.

Mobility Rights and Public Transportation

Another unexpected issue that emerged for me was mobility rights. In 2017, the Saskatchewan Party government closed the Saskatchewan Transportation Company (STC)—a publicly owned Crown corporation in the province. Along with five other Saskatoon-based academics, I took the bus to Regina from Saskatoon every week, so I was directly affected. With an approval rating of over 90%, STC was a very successful service. Its ridership was 60% women and over 70% marginalized people, and it served 263 communities, so the cuts hit hard and wide. We knew from statistics and from the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019) that a lack of mobility leads to hitchhiking, and a lack of transportation in rural areas forces the movement of people to urban centres, which leads to a weakening of rural communities (C. Hanson & Jaffe, 2021). When my colleagues and I heard about the shuttering of the bus service—an austerity-based ideological decision by an increasingly authoritarian populist government—we decided to fight back. We hoped someone else would lead the resistance to shuttered service, but it quickly became apparent that someone with privilege was less at risk for speaking out. A few of us spoke up, and the group Save STC was started. Although I had never envisioned myself as a leader in the fight for public transportation in rural and remote Canada, I finally understood how mobility rights work.

> Mobility-related exclusion is [an] increasingly recognized source of marginalization that results from inadequate access to social opportunities and networks in a mobility-driven society.… Lack of transportation then compounds other sources of disadvantage, such as being elderly, having a disability or being a racialized person. (C. Hanson & Jaffe, 2021, p. 139)

Moreover, because it is largely the poor, elderly, and disabled impacted by a lack of mobility rights, they often find it difficult to exercise widespread agency and voice. In this case, I could use my privilege to advocate and do research on the topic (C. Hanson et. al., 2021). Most notable among the work that followed—from rallies and petitions to letters, bus occupations, and presentations at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women—was a gathering of people affected by the bus cuts who came together in the basement of a church to tell their stories about how their lives were being affected. A local artist captured the stories in illustrations on long pieces of paper.[12] Those illustrations were made into posters (see Figures 1, 2, and 3)—one was shipped to the United States to be placed on the wall in Bernie Sanders' office!

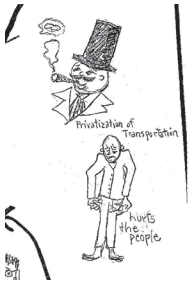

Figure 1. Drawing Created by Jan Norris During a Workshop for Save STC

Note. Photo by the author.

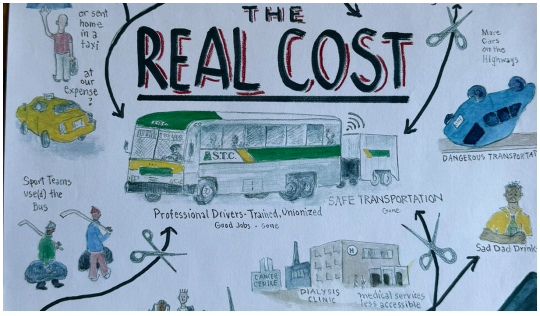

Figure 2. Poster Created by Jan Norris for Save STC

Note. Photo of poster by the author.

12 One of the sources used to document the stories in art form was GATT-Fly's book, *Ah-hah! A New Approach to Popular Education* (1983), which suggests creative ways to draw people and relationships.

Figure 3. Poster created by Jan Norris for Save STC

Note. The poster was created through a participatory workshop facilitated by the author (Cindy). The intention was to discuss and document the different ways people's lives would be impacted without the publicly owned bus service. Photo of poster by the author.

Today I continue doing research on public transportation. While STC was not brought back, we did learn from the process. In May 2023, three of us who were founders of Save STC appeared as expert witnesses in front of a House of Commons transportation committee (Schiefke, May 2023), illustrating again that what starts out local can morph into a larger, different movement. I would be remiss, however, not to say that along with leadership, I have also endured harassment and public gaslighting. It is in these moments that solidarity and belonging to movements can help, reminding us that we are not alone. Some people

would say that resistance to protests is a sign that we are being effective. Nonetheless, we all need support.

Insights From the Lived Experiences

When I think back on these experiences, I am reminded of where I started—with my mother's courage to stand up to sexism; learning Freirean pedagogy in a university class and then seeing it applied in other contexts; with the seeds planted by the co-op youth program; taking risks with Indigenous students; and learning about equality from a little village in Ethiopia. Through my reflections on these experiences, I have searched for patterns, themes, or signs of what they might mean to activism and solidarity. I originally conceived that I would focus on the tensions inherent in transformative processes, but it was not the tensions that came through, despite the fact that they are always there. In these stories, risk, courage, reciprocity, and creativity were challenged by colonialism/capitalism, hegemonic patterns, and conflict. But hope and courage, formed through bonds of conviction, relationality, cooperation, and belonging, continued to surface. The stories I described led to concrete and sometimes courageous expressions of solidarity in different settings—in teaching, academic research, and with community, locally and internationally.

There were also examples in these stories where privilege was used to equalize unequal examples of power. This occurred with a recognition that agency and voice are not experienced equally, and in many circumstances, people are at risk when they speak up. For example, it is not always realistic to rely on women on social assistance or low-income bus riders to change public policies. However, giving these people the opportunity to have input into what the issues are and how these changes might take place can be agentic, as evidenced by the women on social assistance who started a group after the research project finished. This is how learning, teaching, and community-engaged research become reciprocal processes in a Freirean sense. In all of these stories, there was a component of adult learning that resonated. I mentioned earlier that I learned early on in life that when we understand principles of co-operation, community, and social justice, we do not just accept the way things are; we work to change injustice or inequality. The stories shared in this paper have helped me understand how I did this and how the experiences overlap with each other.

Conclusion

I feel a sense of relief in completing this autoethnography—maybe because of the vulnerabilities in writing about oneself. The tensions were not in the acts of activism and solidarity as much as they were in my own resistance to feeling that my experience deserved to be elevated/shared over those whose stories were not being told. In hindsight, the stories say much about working with others, about adult learning, and about revisiting and maybe revisioning how, what, and where we learn. As Gale and Wyatt (2019) acknowledged, autoethnography can be about stepping into the unknown. It is my hope that these stories will resonate with your own—that through them we can build collective memories that inform and disrupt unjust practices and politics, or even create social movements. Solidarity remains as relevant today as it ever has been; it connects us and the world around us—*covivencia*. Although the process of navigating when to step forward and when to step back was sometimes obvious, what I learned from revolutionary praxis was how to step

into the unknown. Although stepping into the unknown can take courage and conviction, it remains a way to work for social equality and to keep hope alive.

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