In February 2015, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker introduced to the state legislature a radical rewriting of the mission statement of the University of Wisconsin. Walker’s revision of the Wisconsin Idea, which had been enshrined in state statute for more than a century, was to remove words that commanded the university to “search for truth” and “improve the human condition” and replace them with “meet the state’s workforce needs.” Public outrage was so vociferous that even the conservative super-majority of the Wisconsin legislature backed away from the proposal, and the Governor was forced to abandon his revision. Nonetheless, shortly thereafter, the Governor did succeed in pushing through legislation that severely cut the University’s budget, mandated a radical diminution of tenure, and severely curtailed shared governance by transferring several faculty prerogatives (e.g., curriculum decisions) to the exclusive purview of the administration (Strauss, 2015). These radical transformations are hardly unique to Wisconsin. Walker’s assault on public higher education joins radical actions across the nation to reshape public higher education to meet neoliberal priorities (Carpenter, 2015; Giroux, 2012). All told they represent a juggernaut of neoliberal reforms that are truly global in their reach (Giroux, 2012, 2013; Hyatt, Shear, & Wright, 2015). Among these global trends are the devaluing of education as a public good and the push to privatize and financialize educational services. This has been most visible in the sharp decline in public spending on education and the alarming rise in student indebtedness. Educational institutions are increasingly resembling corporations in their governance and in their labor relations as faculty, staff, and students find themselves removed from information shared and decisions made. A disturbing wave of faculty dismissals without due process (see Charmichael 2012; Goldberg, 2015) shows that even tenured faculty are subordinate to autocratic management. The professed goal of educating the citizenry has been replaced by a narrow vocational discourse that imagines students as customers rather than future citizens and that conflates education with job training (Kelderman, 2015). These trends are often overtly anti-democratic or serve to weaken the democratic mission of the University. The foundations of educational purpose and practice are currently shifting beneath our feet. The purpose of universities and the meaning of education are being actively contested.

I read Jennifer Simpson’s book, *Longing for Justice: Higher Education and Democracy’s Agenda*, during this latest crisis in Wisconsin. Simpson’s book examines the possibility of preparing undergraduates for lives in which they are empowered to forge a just democracy. Simpson asks how this might be done within the neoliberal university? This will likely be a frustrating read for practitioners of service-learning and civic engagement who see themselves as committed to educating for a just society. Simpson offers up a harsh critique of such work. Nonetheless, the book is fodder for some serious and necessary reflection, and I heartily recommend it to anyone concerned with the current struggles over education under neoliberalism and especially to practitioners of service-learning and civic engagement.

The book is composed of four interwoven elements: (a) foundational questions about education’s purpose and outcomes; (b) stories drawn from Simpson’s nearly 20 years as a college professor in the United States and Canada; (c) critiques in four successive chapters addressing service-learning, civic engagement, engaged scholarship, liberal education (to which civic education is genealogically linked), traditional epistemologies, the use of textbooks, and neoliberalism as obstacles to educating for a just democracy; and (d) the pedagogy necessary
to enact the better world that we seek. Each of these sections is engaging and provocative, and each informs the other recursively.

### Education That Fosters a Just Democracy

The book examines the relationship between undergraduate education and public life. Simpson observes that there is just too much wrong in the world and she is compelled to engage in thought and action that will name and disrupt the injustice that she observes. This longing for justice is heartfelt, aching, and urgent. Simpson believes that a better world is possible but notes that: “One is hard-pressed to find in universities and more broadly, a robust language and imagination for the public good” (p. 28). The book is about transforming undergraduate education to foster and embrace that language and imagination.

This is, foremost, a book of questions. The book begins with the question, what is education for, and more precisely, what role can and should education play in building and sustaining a just democracy? How might educational spaces become places of critique and movement toward justice? Simpson is primarily concerned with what happens at the level of pedagogy, and the pedagogy itself is always about connecting students to the world at large and the struggles for justice within it. Simpson’s opening questions lead to subsets of questions that produce more questions. These questions reappear from chapter to chapter so by the end of the book we cannot help but internalize them and continue to ask them of our own work. And we all would do well to ask ourselves these questions.

Simpson asserts that knowledge and learning can have a public benefit, a well worn path indeed (e.g., Barber & Battistoni, 2011; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, Stephens, & Shulman, 2010, Dewey, 1916), but under academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhodes, 2004) universities pursue privatization in which profit, interests of revenue-generating faculty, and corporations have claims that come before public interests. Simpson believes that higher education has substantial responsibilities in a democratic society. She asks: (a) what is the nature of the social contract that universities have with regard to public life, (b) how does/might this social contract shape undergraduate education, and (c) how do specific approaches to knowledge both structure and inform how students understand society and their capacity to act within it? This leads her to ask: What kinds of habits, ways of seeing the world, and social norms do universities affirm? What are universities’ priorities, to whom are universities primarily accountable, and what does this mean for curriculum, pedagogy, and for our individual, collective, and institutional practice? What matters in our courses? What knowledge will be included and excluded? What kinds of knowledge do students need to actively participate in a democratic society?

### The Power of Story

Simpson suggests that telling and listening to stories (as well as reflecting on them to make sense of them) is the work of democracy. The book begins with a handful of personal and poignant scenarios from Simpson’s experiences in and out of the classroom at Simpson’s experiences in and out of the classroom at the University of Waterloo where she is chair of the Department of Drama and Communication. These scenarios are drawn from quotidian classroom events that will feel familiar to anyone teaching with social justice in mind, and they point to the challenges of teaching for justice and democracy under neoliberal hegemony.

For example, in a course on Gender, Culture, and Communication, we are introduced to a student put off by the consideration of queer identities in the syllabus and discussions in class about the harassment of the campus LGBT alliance – things which she sees as beyond the legitimate scope of a course on communication, an unwarranted obligation, and a waste of her personal time. We also learn about starkly different perceptions of White and Black students in an intercultural communication class during a discussion about Amadou Diallo, an unarmed immigrant from Guinea shot 41 times by New York City police while standing in his apartment building doorway in 1999. Each story poses a multitude of questions, serving as a lens offering progressively sharper focus on teaching for a just democracy as we consider Simpson’s critiques of liberal education, neoliberalism, and the pedagogical interventions these scenarios invite. And it is through revisiting these stories throughout the book that Simpson’s own critical pedagogy is revealed.

### Critical Theory and the Problem of Civic Engagement

The theoretical scaffolding for this work is constructed around Simpson’s understanding and embrace of critical theory and critical race theory. Four assumptions guide her work: (a) social life is relational, (b) inequality exists, (c) power matters, (d) language and imagination for the public good are necessary for living well together. She distinguishes critical teaching and scholarship from liberal varieties. Critical work is expressly concerned with power, naming injustice and seeking ways to disrupt it, as well as pointing the way toward a more just world. Critical scholarship and teaching consistently draw attention to the political nature of all knowledge
production and learning, and ask, what are the consequences of our work and for whom? Critical scholarship rejects the notion of neutrality in scholarship and teaching, noting that to be neutral is to take a stand for the status quo. Critical scholars do not only study the public good but pursue it. Simpson contrasts this critical approach to teaching and scholarship with liberal and neoliberal approaches where the above priorities are poorly developed or absent, and she offers us five substantial critiques to make that point. I will focus only on the critiques of engagement and service-learning but caution that each of the critiques speaks to the others and are best read together.

A Critique of Civic Engagement

Simpson distinguishes among civic engagement, the scholarship of engagement, and service-learning, and offers separate critiques of each. In the interest of concision, I combine her arguments and henceforth will refer to the aggregate of the three allied practices as civic engagement. Simpson acknowledges that civic engagement constitutes “one of the most sustained and systematic responses to the question of higher education’s relationship with public life” (p. 69), but she wonders whether belief in the promise of civic engagement is misplaced. Simpson is not herself a practitioner of civic engagement and it is not clear how much direct experience she has with people or communities engaged in such work. Her critique is apparently based largely on a review of recent literature, building on recent critiques offered by Saltmarsh and Hartley (2013) and others. Most of these criticisms have been offered previously by practitioners and scholars of civic engagement themselves (e.g., Hyatt, 2001; Keisch, 2013; Mitchell, 2008; Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009) so there is not a lot that is new here. Nonetheless, in their totality, these criticisms pack a punch and raise the question: If we are aware of the gap between engagement’s promise and realization, then why is that gap still with us?

Simpson asserts that the bodies of work encompassed by engagement carry within them sets of assumptions that:

- Negate the very analysis and practice that attention to democratic practices, the public good and justice require. Rather than ‘not going far enough,’ I would argue that these three bodies of work, paired with liberal norms, are far too invested in maintaining allegiances to the individual as primary, to the illusion of neutrality and to existing power arrangements to effectively take up questions of injustice and pursue the possibility of justice. Further, even as the scholarship of engagement, civic engagement and service learning represent the most institutionally affirmed responses to the question of democratic practices and undergraduate education, numerous faculty members and departments pursue their work with little or no consideration of this scholarship and its relevance for undergraduate education. (p. 107)

For Simpson, there is a gap between rhetoric and outcomes. Civic education may well have challenged what counts within the University but it has not changed what counts. Simpson concludes that civic education as currently imagined and practiced is not just ineffective but an obstacle to education for a just democracy, and that in its efforts to become integrated into the mainstream of institutions it has been fully coopted. Simpson finds a multitude of faults and limitations with civic engagement, a summary of which are: (a) absence of a justice orientation in service and an overwhelming emphasis on charity; (b) emphasis on impacts at the individual rather than the institutional level; (c) emphasis on student outcomes rather than community outcomes; (d) weak, one-sided partnerships with little attention to creating more just relationships; (e) failure of service to raise students’ awareness of privilege; (f) minimal attention to power at the systemic or structural level; (g) minimal consideration of race and racism in engagement courses; (h) shaping service-learning around conventional disciplinary norms without any consideration of civic, public, or democratic outcomes; (j) failure to instill in students a belief in political or collective action; (k) civic engagement’s caution in relation to adopting explicit political priorities and discourses in order to accommodate integration into mainstream academic frameworks; (k) prevalence of conventional models of epistemological authority; (l) tendency to talk about “societal challenges” (e.g., the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or the failing economy) without talking much about who or what is responsible for those challenges; (m) the adoption of liberal language that sanitizes or dilutes or somehow obscures the challenges to democracy and justice that life under neoliberal capitalism entails, language that often masks a history that has been anything but beneficent to some, a radical denial of current unjust circumstances, and a language that is anything but oppositional or disruptive; (n) and perhaps most damning, striving for fit within existing academic structures vs. trying to transform those structures, and not acknowledging that democratic engagement itself requires substantial institutional change.

She concludes by asking:

We reveal most about ourselves and our society in terms of how we turn toward the realization that there is ‘too much wrong.’ Similarly, how do the scholarship of engagement, civic engage-
ment and service learning urge us to turn toward ‘too much wrong’ or to consider and act against state sanctioned violence directed at Black and Indigenous men……? In what ways are civic engagement, the scholarship of engagement and service-learning embedded within liberal norms and how do such norms themselves impose constraints on how…engagement… might name injustice and imagine justice. For educators disturbed by ….the deaths of men like Amadou Diallou….and by our students’ refusal to consider injustice against queer communities… what do(es)… engagement… have to offer? (p. 107)

Simpson acknowledges that some teacher/scholars doing civic engagement do attempt to work critically with an aim toward just democracy but finds this work to be so insignificant as to not make a ripple in the greater pond of engagement, and as a result she does not offer a single hopeful counterexample to her indictment. Simpson longs for justice. She finds the current situation intolerable. There is an urgency to her challenge. We all would do well to pay attention and reflect on our own commitments and understandings of the current crises. In light of her critique, I am unable to assert that I think that I personally have done enough (Reiff & Keene, in press).

The Paradox of Critique

Critique is essential for radical theory and action. It has the power to disrupt our common understandings and to move us in new directions. But it also has the power to erase possibility and hence inhibit action. Shear and Burke (2013) ask, how does critical theory constrain politics and action? They point out, with regard to opposition to capitalism, that any alternative to capitalism [they offer the example of community economies (Gibson Graham, Healey, & Cameron, 2013)] is nonetheless embedded within global capitalist relations and will thus inevitably reflect and to a degree accommodate the capitalism it is meant to resist. They write:

When capitalism is understood to have the final say, possibilities for changing the world become feckless and naive. Revolution becomes a vague, distant, utopian dream; an impossibility. Our moral optimism is reduced to envisioning "reasonable" political efforts that might ameliorate capitalism through reform and redistribution, progressive taxation, financial regulation, conservation and energy policy, and so on. In other words, we can envision interventions that are possible given the "realities" of our political landscape, but we dare not think beyond…. What are we left with? Our critical opposition provides a secure identity and the perverse pleasure of knowing how the world works, of knowing that material and discursive processes tied to capital-ist production will produce subjects who ultimately reproduce capitalism. But our theoretical and ontological positioning offers no room for maneuver. Even if we want to move from reform, cynicism, and despair toward possibility, letting go of critique in the face of a historical juggernaut seems insouciant and irresponsible. (p. 1)

Simpson’s critique finds civic engagement and liberal education to be unredeemable. She calls on her students to imagine possibilities for a better world that we build together through actions that transform institutions. But clearly all of our actions and solutions are embedded within neoliberal capitalism and a hegemonic system of injustice. It is nearly impossible to go off the grid socially and step outside of these relations. So it is worth asking whether her critique has left us sufficient room to maneuver? Simpson sees no possibility in civic engagement – only maintenance of the status quo. Given how much is wrong in the world, stepping away from the critique to explore new possibilities might seem to her “insouciant and irresponsible.” Undertaking any kind of civic imaginative initiative will necessarily fail the test of Simpson’s critique if for no other reason than it is embedded within neoliberal sensibilities and institutions. With respect to critical civic engagement, I think that counter-examples (e.g. examples of justice oriented engagement) are important as they place us at the crossroads of possibility and impossibility. Morton and Bergbauer write in this issue of a comprehensive, long-term, justice-based collaboration between The Smith Hill neighborhood in Providence and Providence College students and faculty. It is a partnership filled with possibility and one that strives for justice. I believe that in many ways it is the antithesis of all that Simpson finds wrong with civic engagement – an inspiring program addressing many things wrong in the world. Many other useful examples come to mind. I am personally inspired by the work of people such as Sonya Atalay, Rick Battistoni, Tim Eatman, Susan Hyatt, Vin Lyon-Callo, Tania Mitchell, Jennifer Sandler, Boone Shear, and Jonathan Rosa, to name just a few scholar/teachers who in their own scholarship, teaching, and activism have voiced some of the same critiques offered by Simpson but who nonetheless work impressively toward a better world through civic engagement. There is so much possibility in the works of these people that I have to wonder why Simpson chooses to reject/ignore ongoing work in critical engagement. In my own teaching, I have found that counter-examples built on stories of possibility, stories that do not simply name injustice but demonstrate the creation of more just relationships, have helped to move my students through this crossroads, and for this purpose I have leaned on stories

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that document the construction of successful social movements or non-capitalist economic alternatives in the past or in the present (e.g., Ganz, 2010; Gibson-Graham, Healey, & Cameron, 2013; Sen & Mamdough, 2008; Shear, 2014; Weisman, 2002).

Pedagogy

How does our teaching contribute to or disrupt the crises we face? And how do we integrate our pedagogy with our scholarship and our daily lives so that our roles as scholars, citizens, teachers, and workers are not in contradiction with each other? Simpson writes:

I want to offer all students an understanding of education that takes their questions and concerns seriously, that gives them room to question, doubt and assert, and that draws a connection between education and the material realities of how people live. I strive to offer educational content that will encourage my students to see the complexities of the world in which they live. (p. 20)

Simpson draws explicitly from the work of Paulo Freire, and her approach strikes me as having a kinship with the radical pedagogies of bell hooks (1994) and Laura Rendón (2009). As with hooks and Rendón, Simpson gives us glimpses of what happens in her classroom but never the whole picture. Simpson emphasizes the contingency of every situation and hence is reluctant to dictate to us what we ought to do in our own classrooms. Her work is marked by purposefulness about turning all work in the classroom toward public concern as well as our own being implicated in those concerns. She emphasizes the value of learning from personal experience, creating a space for everyone’s voice, relationality, constant questioning, identifying and challenging oft-hidden underlying assumptions, fostering imagination, reflecting critically, clarifying one’s commitments, resisting the status quo, naming injustice, embracing the political, striving for justice, and affirming that what we do matters. In the classroom, Simpson appears to be a tireless interlocutor, modeling how to ask critical questions, probe at assumptions and common sense, and pushing her students to reflect on their own motivations and practice.

While we can distill all this from her narratives, we would benefit from having more details about what happens in her classroom and beyond. Because our imagination about what can happen in a classroom can be limited, we need concrete examples of good and effective praxis to jumpstart our imagination about teaching and learning. So when one of the students asks Simpson during the Diallo discussion, “What do you think? Forty-one bullets.” (p. 151), we want to know what she said to them and how she mediated the conflict between her own conviction that the Diallo shooting reflected deeply embedded racism in American policing and the understandings of some of her White students that the shooting was necessary and justified. And we want to know how it came to pass that by the end of the term, those White students who saw the shooting as justified and the Black student who saw the shooting as reflective of her own experience with racist policing, engaged in meaningful and apparently mutually respectful dialogue or debate (which one is not clear). We want to know this, not because Simpson has the answers but because her experience can reveal the inner workings of a process of how theory and action combine to move students toward justice. It may be one example from one specific context but the details matter when so many of our colleagues are not certain that this is possible, particularly under the constraints of neoliberal reform. We may agree or disagree with Simpson’s interventions but the scenarios inevitably lead the reader to ask, what would I do in that situation, what outcomes would I seek, and what would be the likely consequences of my actions? And I suspect these scenarios will remind many readers of how rarely we speak with our colleagues about our pedagogy and the goings on in our classrooms.

Simpson’s cascade of questions about teaching and learning led me to pose a multitude of questions, thoughts, and answers of my own. I will offer just a few in closing. I would like to know how Simpson’s students come to discover and embrace their own agency? Millennial students are fully enculturated as neoliberal subjects with deeply internalized neoliberal sensibilities. Hence, it is insufficient to simply tell students that knowledge is contingent or that they have agency or that injustice exists or that a better world is possible. None of these ideas will stick unless we disrupt the pervasive neoliberal sensibilities and epistemologies that govern our students’ common sense. And I wonder how we teach agency in classes if the classes are not experiential, action-oriented, or engaged? At UMass, our ethnographic work with Millennial undergraduate students indicates that students believe that they do not have agency now but probably will when they are older, more educated, more credentialed, or more wealthy. We know that students who participate in meaningful campus activism or off-campus justice-oriented civic engagement projects graduate with a stronger and better defined sense of agency than their peers. (Mitchell, 2015; Mitchell, Visconti, Keene, & Battistoni, 2011). Engagement in partnership with a wide range of publics in civically meaningful projects (particularly social change projects) offer students tangible lessons in how their choices and their actions have consequences. I would like to know
more about how Simpson fosters or imagines fostering a sense of agency in the classroom alone.

And what about collective action? At the core of Simpson’s learning objectives is the need to “move students from I to we,” that is, toward building a better world together. But other than an unspecified group project, we don’t hear much about how Simpson’s students come to know about or embrace the idea of collective action so we are left to imagine how her students could expand their longings and imaginations across time, space, and personnel. Neoliberalism enculturates our students to see themselves as individual consumers subject to the laws of markets. One way to disrupt this logic is to teach explicitly about mass movements, community organizing, and collective action. Another is to give students real experience in working together, not just on a group project, which our ethnographic research (Keene, 2009) tells us students detest and almost uniformly approach as atomized, individual agents, but by building community and solidarity within the class and by undertaking meaningful social change projects in collaboration with members of diverse publics.

Another answer is to give students a chance to experience building and taking part in authentic community. How can our students imagine living well together when they have so little experience with authentic community? Under neoliberalism our knowledge of community and its workings is profoundly impoverished, our sense of civic and public commitments disparaged, and our inclination to focus on the individual prioritized. Hence it is no small challenge for any of us to imagine inspiring alternatives. Simpson rightly warns us of the difficulty of moving toward that which we cannot hold in our imagination, a fundamental challenge in community organizing as well, but she offers no discussion of building community or solidarity or anything that would help students who have so little experience with community imagine it. Indeed, she does not ask how we can jumpstart imaginations that have been so thoroughly fettered? So it would help to know if/how Simpson fosters community and solidarity in her classroom and if/how this carries over in the praxis of her students once they leave the classroom and if/why she eschews models for this kind of work that have been developed by other radical pedagogues including practitioners of civic engagement (e.g., Addes & Keene, 2006; Mitchell et al., 2011; Morton & Bergbauer, 2015).

Finally, we also ought to ask what happens when students leave Simpson’s classroom (or our own classrooms)? What does their praxis look like beyond the classroom and beyond the university? What are the long-term effects of the work we do in our courses to envision a better world and to act on that vision?

Toward New Possibilities

What would happen if we applied our civic imagination to teaching and learning environments? Can we imagine a learning setting where power is shared and is the subject of ongoing reflection, where the desks are not arranged in rows (or there are no desks), and where there is no professor at the front of the room (or no professor at all); where students are not motivated by grades or credits or future wages but by a deep intellectual curiosity about the world and by a desire to shape it; where everyone is a teacher and a learner and takes responsibility for each others’ learning; where our personal experience matters and mutual learning is governed by trust, empathy, compassion, and respect among the learners; where the learning is not bounded by the physical or temporal limitations of the classroom; where learning evokes a multitude of emotions including joy; where justice and democratic sensibilities inform our work; and where all learning is directed toward realizing the better world that we desire? And can we imagine where such learning environments are not the exception but the norm on our campuses?

Simpson rightly laments the limitations of what can be done in a single semester by one faculty member working in isolation. How much content can we possibly cover – especially when we are giving proper attention to process? How much remedial work must we do when our students have such deeply internalized neoliberal sensibilities? And how well can we really get to know our students and they each other in a mere 13 weeks or so? Education for a just democracy requires not just isolated courses but a curriculum (see, for example, Mitchell et al., 2011). Can we imagine what academic departments and universities would look like if they were so oriented? Effecting this shift will require solidarity among our colleagues and students. How many of us who endeavor to do critical or transformative work are working at the margins of our departments or disciplines? We get the sense that Simpson labors in isolation and receives opprobrium from administrators, and yet she is chair of her department. How many of our colleagues, in the face of increasingly autocratic and retributive management, have become risk averse and more reluctant to teach against prevailing institutional (neoliberal) priorities? We who believe we are doing critical work need to ask: Who are the others who are doing kindred work and share some of our commitments, and how can we support each other in that work? This is not just a problem of pedagogy but of organizing (Hyatt et al., 2015).

Simpson covers much well-trodden territory in her book. I have argued that we must take these criticisms to heart, now more than ever. Many have been
around for a long time and we should all be asking why they are still relevant? It would be easy to accuse Simpson of being an armchair critic. But that doesn’t diminish the important things she has to say in this book. She reveals her vexation and frustration and her longing for justice, and she labors valiantly in her classroom to make a dent in what is terribly wrong in the world. But she does not give us much of a sense of how her efforts lead to effective praxis once her students leave the classroom. Nor does she model for us how she seeks to connect her own radical work with that of colleagues to create the collective action necessary to promote the changes for which she longs. Some of the best examples that I know of radical teaching and curriculum building for justice and against neoliberalism can be found within critical civic engagement (e.g., Morton & Bergbauer, 2015; Rendón, 2009). Similarly, when I am looking for the robust language and imagination about the public good that Simpson asserts is absent within higher education, I find it among my civically engaged colleagues (see especially, Morton & Bergbauer, 2015; Hyatt et al., 2015). Simpson appears to be laboring in isolation. She might find some solace and some solidarity in our ongoing conversations.

This is a book that all of us in the civic engagement community should read. Indeed, we should read it together with other colleagues committed to civic engagement and to the idea of a strong and just democracy. We should ponder the questions posed, reflect on how they lead us to think about our own commitments, practice, and responses to the challenges we face, and reflect together on Simpson’s closing questions – what do you see and what will you do?

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