

RADICAL TEACHER

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What's So Dangerous about a Free Education?

Radical Feminist Musings From a CUNY Student in a Corporate Stranglehold

by Julieta Salgado



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF BETHANY WALTER

I woke up from a feverish nap, the bottom half of my body on the cold floor, my upper torso on a corner piece of matting. Other women's feet lined above my head in a row of little spooning bodies, all of us in a forced intimacy for the night at Brooklyn Central Booking. It so happened I was in the often delightful, but quite aggressive company of queer women in a jail cell. One big friendly dyke asked me, "Yo Sparkles"—my jailbird name due to my gold sequin miniskirt—"What you in for?" I replied: "I wanted a free education."

I was arrested on my college campus on May 2nd, 2012, for participating in a civil disobedience action in front of the college president's office. After months of organizing around tuition hikes, our depleting curriculum, a lack of student resources and consistently ignored invitations to meet with administration, members of the Brooklyn College Student Union held a sit-in outside of the president's office. The goal of our non-violent direct action was to make awareness of our plight unavoidable and to obstruct the path of business as usual. Although I had not planned to get arrested that day, it was not entirely unbelievable that I did: while City University of New York (CUNY) "peace officers" were violently evicting my friends and teachers from the hallway, I decided to let my body go in the middle of all the chaos elicited by our peaceful sit-in. While my friends were refusing to move from their school hallway or trying to film the police or just protect their bodies from violence, while my friend Eric was being wrongfully and brutally arrested,¹ I decided to see what would happen if I just let go. Just let my body go. Let the moment carry me.

My body was tossed around by the motions of the officers pushing my friends. I fell to the ground and decided to stay there with my eyes shut. I was asked if I needed medical attention, I was asked to get up, I was commanded to get up, I was dragged by one arm so that I might get up, I was threatened with further punishment if I did not get up, I was handcuffed because I did not get up. I was dragged, almost dropped on the ground several times, shoulders almost dislocated as I was tossed and turned and hauled out of Brooklyn College by no fewer than three officers and shoved into a police van for further

processing off campus. Not unbelievable, like I said, if you think I was asking for it. But this is not merely an account about Sparkles, the girl who played possum. This is a critical analysis of public higher education by an undergraduate sociology and art major who is resisting the increased corporatization of CUNY with mind, body, and soul.

A teacher and ally recently asked me to write about what led me to become a student activist. The readily available answer is Occupy Wall Street (OWS). I spent time at Zuccotti Park, participated in discussions and general assemblies, and joined several marches. I watched people old enough to be my parents and young enough to be my nephews assaulted for chanting and demonstrating, for protecting each other, for making street art and telling strangers very kind and empowering things, for giving *everyone* who asked food, clothing and shelter. I witnessed and became attuned to the reality that people of color are targets for state-issued violence. I learned that debt—student debt and other forms of debt—are forms of indenture, orchestrated for the wealth of the 1%. During that most colorful American Autumn,² it was difficult to convince myself that I still had to go to class, to write papers, to do a little tap dance so all my teachers would keep me afloat in the silent and mechanized world of a corporate education.



THE AUTHOR ON MAY DAY PHOTO BY TOM MARTINEZ

Yet the more telling and complicated answer to the question of what radicalized me is the academy itself: the classroom, the course subjects, the demanding hours of reading texts and synthesizing theory and producing my own work, and the marvelous people and student activists I have come in contact with along the way. In short, my CUNY college life as a whole. A number of other sources and experiences have given me the ability to understand my individual struggles in their larger social contexts, but there has been nothing quite like college, like a public college in New York City this past fall during Occupy, to really wake me up.

At first as a wide-eyed photography student with light feet, I slowly began to follow OWS actions with the personal conviction that maybe, just maybe, I could do something to make a difference. Initially, my goals were

really that vague: maybe I could be one more person at the plaza, at the stock exchange, at an unpermitted march, one more voice saying I do not need a permit to demand justice for everyone around me, to learn what living without a price might feel like. In time, I began to make friends and other connections, too—it turned out that sociology and art made more sense than ever out in the streets! Most important, the relevance of social justice to my student life became so clear to me that activism has now become absolutely necessary to my survival. And ironically, the very educational institution I am (seemingly) fighting has given me the vocabulary and the platform to confront the oppressive dynamics that it embodies and promulgates.

Meanwhile, I saw that the “real world” I would someday join as a professional was falling apart all around me and giving way, in Occupy, to something totally new. Not perfect, not forever, but a tangible hope that another world might be possible. A former teacher of mine once said, “Social Theory without action is just hot air.” It was an afterthought or a murmur but I caught how profound it was. And how utterly dangerous: everything you do here is bullshit if you do not make a difference outside. Maybe we were being scolded for mediocre class work, but I took that as a direct order to fight this wretched system. Period.

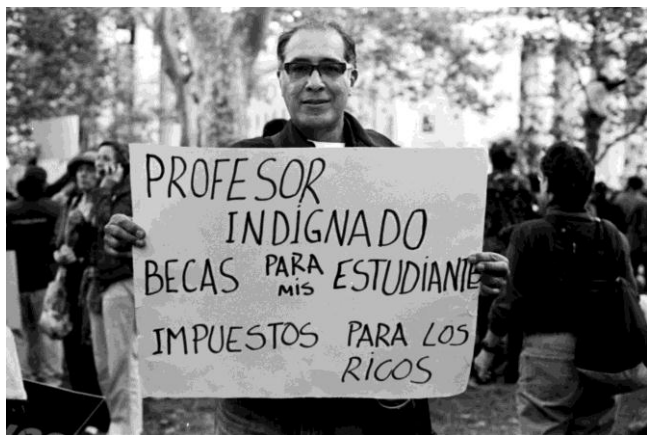


PHOTO BY JULIETA SALGADO

I have come to see that the everyday realities of my life are political. And the challenges of these everyday realities have helped me see what is wrong at CUNY. For starters, being a student is the daily task of cunningly navigating bureaucracies that will certify my educational journey with a degree, all the while using every cent of student loans to keep my sorry ass fed and housed. It takes a double consciousness to want to be a creative, political personality in academia *and* to worry constantly about tuition hikes, unaffordable campus food, racist

“security,” poor student services, and unjust curricular expectations. Although we consent to have our intellects and our emotional endurance challenged by going into higher education, the ugly truth is that actual learning is not the priority of CUNY academic authorities. Rather, education is about following exact steps, showing up, shutting up, performing okay and moving on, like an assembly line of future graduates. The goal is to perform the theatrics of school well and graduate, not to be curious, or to have genuine fulfillment or even failures that lead to self-discovery.

Paying off my student debt seems impossible; the prospect of having to pay twice the cost of my rent every month in loans just suffocates me.³ So I focus on the immediate, on the resistance of now. My aim as a student activist has not been to fight my school or the college president or even the cops, but to hold CUNY accountable for what I consider to be its societal role: to provide a free and quality education to the people of New York City. To those of us who rely heavily if not solely on the public sphere for our livelihood (elementary education, transportation, medical treatment, social security, food stamps), the increased corporatization of public higher education through tuition hikes means that one more arena is excluding people who cannot afford to privatize their own livelihood. This situation has led my education to become indelibly linked with my political resistance. It has left me with the choice to either radicalize or entirely conform. Conformity not only spells out a murderous debt⁴ on my trail, but also renders me an accomplice of the present state of things and the future of CUNY. No, tuition hikes are not okay for me, they are not okay for my classmates, and they are not okay for the future generations. Tuition in general is not okay. For a range of reasons, many CUNY students may not be upset about tuition hikes. But I hold fast to the vision on which CUNY was founded: top quality, free education for all who need it.

The moment I decided that tuition and the surveillance of student activists were unacceptable at Brooklyn and all CUNY colleges, I was confronted with other questions. Should food, shelter, and other public goods really be free? “Maybe,” I wondered, “I should just walk into a store and take food, because it’s your right to eat!” Yes, that is correct! I have not reached a point of necessity where I have taken food to survive, but I judge no one else who has. I think it is criminal to be denied sustenance or that anyone in this city should be homeless considering the highest foreclosure rate in the state is here, in East New

York.⁵ The police may exist to shut down your loud neighbor, to stop and frisk youth to appease someone else's sense of security, or to respond three hours late to a violent crime, but more often than not they are around to make sure you never threaten someone else's private property or profits. So yeah, I say take what you need, and the same thing goes for education.

It is an enormous privilege for me to be in college. As a first-generation queer daughter of Ecuadorian immigrants, the odds are neatly and systemically stacked against me. Only 13% of Latinos in the United States have college degrees.⁶ I'm excited to help raise that statistic in the next year because I know it will mean that despite the racist, capitalist patriarchy I live in, I—and others like me—will graduate and make what we want out of our education. Is that so dangerous? The fact that more and more Latinas and Latinos might gain greater class consciousness, engage creatively and intellectually in this country, and make profound social changes is dangerous to the status quo indeed. But if education is a privilege, as it is for me, should it also be a commodity? While student loan debt is a national crisis that affects people across ethnicities, genders and social classes, there is something especially harmful about a public school community closing its doors to more and more people. Columbia University was never in the cards for me to begin with, so if the only educational institution that exists for someone like me keeps me out, what can I do? The people that will be excluded from CUNY schools will include that other 87% of Latinas and Latinos that cannot afford an education in the first place. Another good reason for me to resist.

Other contributors to my radicalization are the sociological materials I study as well as other active students I have met on campus. The basic canon of my chosen major includes mostly white, cis-males⁷ that tend to be critical of capitalism, and may even be socialists. These "fathers" of sociology are indeed of great import, although incredibly flawed in their lack of comprehensive sex, gender and race analysis. The first time I was assigned *The Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels, I thought someone somewhere was not paying attention: why would academic authorities want to give their consumers a basic level of class consciousness? Didn't they realize how bad this could be for business? I took this basic understanding of capitalism and started organizing with the Brooklyn College Student Union, which is neither a club nor a form of student government, but a close-knit group of radical students resisting the corporate stranglehold on our

education. I also began to learn from different campus communities such as the Brooklyn College Dream Team—undocumented students who are more economically vulnerable to policy changes than your average students—and Students for Justice in Palestine, who raise consciousness on a campus known for its surveillance of Muslim student groups.⁸



PHOTO BY JULIETA SALGADO

This past year at Brooklyn College has taught me that the fruitful little "edufactory"⁹ where I study has an undeniable relationship with the New York Police Department, which has a relationship with the CUNY Board of Trustees (whose members are all business people and not academics), which has a relationship with the army recruitment programs that place ads in our school newspaper (and through this recruitment we are offered an escape from our share of the 1 trillion dollar national student loan debt). Seeing how all these things not only relate, but also desperately depend on one another, is challenging, but very necessary. To see, question, and challenge the interconnected structures that govern your school is not a sign of displaced anger; rather, it is an act of genuine caring for your community. The pointless art nouveau sculpture by the Library Cafe ties it all together for me: a combination of kitsch and policy continues to evolve in order to manage an image of normalcy and success while simultaneously protecting investment interests within CUNY. Our tuition will increase by \$300 per year for the next 4 years, yet CUNY executives just received an astronomical pay raise.¹⁰ Drinking fountains will remain broken on campus, because the Coca-Cola vending machines are more profitable; no free tuition also means no free water. The quality of our education falls deeper and deeper by the wayside, but while the college

lawns and banners remain neatly manicured, why should we complain? Isn't this what progress *looks* like?

The fight for education is a legitimate revolutionary front that is understandably but clumsily being kept at bay by implicit and explicit instruments of coercion and violence. Raising tuition every year is an implicit form of racist, classist, sexist violence. It keeps specific bodies out of specific spaces. The aggressive "peace officers" at the gates represent the most explicit form of violent coercion in CUNY. They are around to keep us from feeling at home, from feeling creative, from feeling like we belong at CUNY and that CUNY belongs to *us*. The cops on campus, much like on the streets, much like in elementary school playgrounds, are there to remind us that nothing is ours, that there is no true public space, just the protection of capital's interests by any means necessary. The security forces are there to make sure the path of business, of money, is not obstructed by our individual experiences. The CUNY cops remain on our campuses because our school, like food, like a home, like life with dignity in America, is not free.



PHOTO BY JULIETA SALGADO

Occupy Wall Street shocked me the way it might have shocked anyone who was not yet an activist, who felt fury and compassion, but who until then only had bad consumer choices to blame for society's ills. Suddenly there it all was, open and raw, bursting through the custom tailored seams of the financial district: corporate greed, inequity, police brutality, racism, sexism, rape culture, class war, the housing crisis, health-of-every-kind crisis, and of course, the madness of policing "public" space. I once read somewhere that Occupy Wall Street and all radical spaces are not vacuums; you do not walk into them and leave all the bad stuff outside and find only love and solidarity inside. Even though we were building an

ideological space into a thrilling reality, you cannot wish away years of poverty or trauma, you cannot demand an equitable world and magically expect men not to rape.¹¹ When things would go wrong in these spaces, it becomes easier to blame the movement than to blame the existing state of society as a whole. Occupy Wall Street was not troublesome because people are leftists or because it housed homeless folks of every circumstance or because it damaged our sweet sense of urbane oblivion. It was troublesome because even dreamers and fighters have had to live within this violent empire. The real resistance comes from within radical spaces, with comrades. The cops are just a distraction from that unlearning and the possibilities for liberation—much as they are on campus.

I learned early on that there was no such thing as truly public space in New York City. At Zuccotti Park, when we would stand in a circle and speak loudly with other people, when we would take up time and space to invest in other people's lives in a public manner, the police would immediately begin to harass us, to disperse our lawful activities. Anything that was not producing capital gain and transaction was obsolete, obstructive and must be destroyed, even if it meant bashing in faces like your own.¹² The meaning and use of the law suddenly bent itself completely out of shape to preserve a space and an ideology whose time was clearly over: that of corporate guild and gain. The very American creed I had been forced to pledge allegiance to as a child was now being purged in the streets, was being sweated out of me as I avoided the blow of a baton, as I tried to take what I thought was mine, what I thought was my own agency and hometown and freedom of movement and instead found my life in danger. A sort of danger no one had ever told me about.

Occupy Wall Street woke up a side of my imagination that could easily become entirely romantic, because isn't it totally sexy to run in the streets and scream "OCCUPY! SHUT IT DOWN! NEW YORK IS A PEOPLE'S TOWN!?" But once the march was over, I realized that the imagination of OWS was utterly applicable to my college education: why exactly did I have to subscribe to life-threatening debt in order to get an education? Why were all my adjunct teachers also struggling with their own student debt, low wages, and threatened benefits? Why did campus security nervously surround my friends and me when we would congregate in a circle? Who made up these rules? I was being set up to fail, my classmates were being set up to fail, the young people I tutor in local high schools were inheriting a CUNY that would only fail them at a later time.

Public education, just like public space, was now a myth, something being held captive by values I was raised to believe were the only ones worth protecting. Someone told me that CUNY was free before the mid-1970's,¹³ all hushed, like a secret or an ancient world swallowed by time. And the unanswered question: what is so impossible, so unbelievable about a right to education?

So now that CUNY sounds like a drab correctional facility that continues its violence on my person every single day, do I want to leave it? I thought about that when I had to return to class the week following my arrest. Having to look at the same uniformed faces that had bared their teeth and hands at me, at my friends, at teachers I actually love and admire, I had feelings not of regret but of something far worse: it was a feeling of being in danger in a place I considered a sanctuary. There was something far more personal about being dragged by a cop down the hallway I walk through every day than being shoved by a cop at a street protest. With no regrets, and taking my feelings of unsafety one day at a time, I have decided that violence will not keep me away from my intellectual and artistic ambitions. Not by a long shot. The vulgarity and hypocrisy of brutalizing dissenting students is not enough to kill my dreams. Nor are batons, pepper spray, or bullets. If anything, the fact that people would be willing to hurt me and my comrades for our ideals of equality, access, and compassion is very telling: who is doing the chanting and who is doing the silencing? And which side are you on?

As I mentioned before, we are a revolutionary front. We are repressed because we are of critical importance: we produce both literal wealth and invaluable creative wealth. The workers, the students, and the teachers—we are the academy. What is so dangerous about a free, equitable, anti-oppressive, all-inclusive public education for all people? I hope to find out in my lifetime.

Notes

¹ Two weeks after Eric and I were arrested, over 200 faculty members and other supporters held a silent protest on campus, during which they delivered letters to the college president urging that the charges against the two of us be dropped. I ultimately received an Adjournment in Contemplation of Dismissal while Eric battled in court for months to have very serious charges reduced to a disorderly conduct charge. He remains on probation.

² Occupy Wall Street folks referred to this emerging season of dissent as the American Autumn, inspired by the Arab Spring of that year in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere around the Arab world.

³ A close friend of mine who is a Rochester Institute of Technology alumna has to do this every single month.

⁴ Climbing number of suicides due to student loan debt in the U.S http://www.huffingtonpost.com/c-cryn-johannsen/student-loan-debt-suicides_b_1638972.html

⁵ <http://www.osc.state.ny.us/osdc/rpt13-2011.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.census.gov/prod/2012pubs/acsbr10-19.pdf>

⁷ "Cisgender" is when an individual's gender matches their sex. I use this term and draw attention to whiteness in order to highlight the lack of feminist theory and works by people of color as standards in Sociology.

⁸ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/21/nypd-spied-on-muslim-stud_n_1290544.html

⁹ "Edu-factory" refers to the way that university education is becoming standardized and commodified. The term also refers to "a transnational collective engaged in the transformations of the global university and conflicts in knowledge production." For more, see: <http://www.edu-factory.org/wp/about/>.

¹⁰ <http://www.psc-cuny.org/clarion/august-2012/cuny-lifts-executive-salary-ceiling-stage-set-future-raises>

¹¹ There was a heartbreaking instance of assault at the Liberty Plaza camp, to which the community itself responded with elaborate support, the establishment of a women-only tent and growing conversations about building safe space within the occupation. Mainstream media and authorities used this occasion to blame activists and not rape culture.

¹² I always call out the police officers with Latino last names.

¹³ CUNY was tuition-free until 1975 when, coincidentally, its student body became predominantly people of color. See: <http://takebackbrooklyn.wordpress.com/cuny-101/>.



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