

# Situated solidarities and the practice of scholar-activism

Wednesday 18 April 2018, by [DRISCOLL DERICKSON Kate](#), [ROUTLEDGE Paul](#) (Date first published: 1 July 2015).

**Grounded in an analysis of an ongoing collaboration with rural peasant movements (BKF - BKS) in Bangladesh, we explore the possibility of forging solidarity through practices of scholar-activism. In so doing, we consider the practice of reflexivity, reconsider forms of solidarity, and draw on the concept of convergence spaces as a way to envision sites of possibility. We draw on the work of Nagar and Geiger's notion of situated solidarities (2007) to propose an alternative form of reflexive practice in scholarship. We then posit that there are 6 "practices" that provide a useful schematic for thinking through the opportunities for the construction of these solidarities.**

## Situating solidarities of scholar-activism

As social subjects, we act in "a world over-determined by relations of power exploitation, inequality and violence" (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013: 371). Such relations are accentuated with respect to our location in a dominant institution such as a University, that is enrolled in the process of (re)producing a particular social order (ibid). Scholar-activism must work in and against these institutional practices and purposes, by acknowledging that our lives are entwined with the lives of others - through the legacies of colonialism, through flows of capital and commodities, through modern telecommunications (Corbridge 1993; hooks 1994; Cumbers and Routledge, 2004) "and through structures of power and oppression and the cultural myths that underwrite them" (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013: 371).

We agree with Badiou (2008), however, when he argues that to resist the current conjuncture (of crisis, austerity, accumulation by dispossession) we must recognise that all belong to the same world as ourselves. In so doing we make unity in terms of living acting beings rather than the idea of a world 'united by objects and signs' (2008: 39). This is not to efface the familiar axes of difference that privilege some against others, but rather to acknowledge our mutual existence as people concerned with injustice and inequality and with a desire and dream to confront and change it. We live in a 'world of many worlds' (Marcos, 1996) but that constitutes the bedrock of our working together in solidarity, the possibility, through the partial identification of common ground, of a 'performative unity' between scholar activists and activists.

Thus, researchers can make too much of the structural distance between themselves and the movements and communities with which they work, and should be encouraged to rework the artificial boundaries between spaces of scholarship and spaces of activism. Such reworkings must be highly sensitive, of course, to the historical geometries of power in which they are located while simultaneously challenging and reorganizing them by constructing new communities. Mouffe (2005) reminds us, however, that any mobilization of a constitutive "we" is necessarily productive of a "they." This we/they relation, she argues, is often conceived of as a necessarily antagonistic, destructive relationship. She proposes the construction of a "we" that is intentionally more open, partial, and anti-essentialist - a "we" that does not claim to be a totalizing "we" and thus

acknowledges and recognizes the existence, validity, and possibilities inherent in other self-consciously constructed “wes.” This kind of “we” can be in agonistic, rather than antagonistic, relationships with other groups, and it is in and through this agonism that what she calls “chains of equivalence” or what might be understood as solidarities, can be forged. Agonistic relationships are those that do not seek to eradicate or eliminate difference, but acknowledge and recognize it *as* different while still looking for promising, if partial, synergies to serve as the basis for solidaristic relationships that are forged through antiessentialist, relational and always incomplete identities. Thus, as Featherstone (2003) has argued, solidarity is better understood and practiced not as the ‘amalgamation of fixed interests,’ but rather as ‘generative’ and as ‘actively shaping political identities’ (405) which we find it particularly useful for articulating what solidarity means specifically for the act of producing knowledge. Scholar-activists must reflexively negotiate their multiple, relational positionalities, as authoritative knowers in some settings, as invited or uninvited guests in others, as recognized collaborators, as outsiders, etc. in a dynamic field where knowledge production is but one of multiple expressions of power.

Yet as Nagar and Geiger (2007) point out, efforts by researchers to situate themselves in relation to their research have too often focused on the individual researcher’s positionality rather than structural relationships that mediate those positionalities. This narrowness, they argue, has foreclosed a discussion of the more compelling questions with which such reflexivity should be concerned, which they consider to be questions about how to produce knowledge without reinscribing the interests of the privileged and how to root knowledge production to material social change in places. Building on the work of Rose (1997), they reject the possibility of “transparent reflexivity” insofar as it presumes a legible landscape of power that can be distilled to straightforward structural positions that are independent of, rather than produced in relation to, the research process. They argue that “rather than privileging a reflexivity that emphasizes a researcher’s identity, we must discuss more explicitly the economic, political, and institutional processes and structures that provide the context for the fieldwork encounter and shape its effects – an aspect that has often taken a back seat in reflexive exercises” (2007, 269). Instead, they propose a processual reflexivity that ‘crosses borders with situated solidarities.’ This kind of dialogic reflexivity, which does not presume the researcher brings nothing of value to their research subjects, stands in contrast earlier accounts of feminist reflexivity as one in which the researcher adopts the posture of a ‘suppliant’ (see for example England 1994). It also challenges the notion that, following Harvey (1996), the scholar-activist seeks to achieve a kind of ‘critical distance’ in which the political practice of the collaborators, social movements, or community groups are measured against existing theoretically-driven ideals for the form politics ought to take (see also Routledge, 2008).

In contrast, situated solidarities require that we ask how knowledge produced from research might be of use to multiple others without reinscribing the interests of the privileged; and how such knowledge might be actively tied to a material politics of social change that works in the interests of the disadvantaged (Nagar and Geiger, 2007). Moreover, such situated solidarities must be attentive to the historically contingent strategies and modes of thought that might be used to interpret struggles in particular ways and, in so doing, circumscribe them. Academic ‘fields’ need to be reconfigured in relation to the various ‘fields’ that our collaborators inhabit (Nagar and Geiger, 2007). Situated solidarities are those that are “attentive to the ways in which our ability to evoke the global in relation to the local, to configure the specific nature of our alliances and commitments, and to participate in processes of social change are significantly shaped by our geographical and socio-institutional locations, and the particular combination of processes, events, and struggles underway in those locations” (273). Thus, situated solidarities are intensely relational, and concerned with the struggles made possible by the solidarities and associated research practice, rather than the fetishization of the essentialized social location of the knower in relation to an essentialized subject

of research.

And of course, while we are interested in reinvigorating the possibility that scholarly knowledge can be of value to marginalized communities and social struggles, the form that value takes is context specific and changes over time. In our experience, during the initial process of relationship building, our collaborators have been interested in the kinds of resources and capacity we can lend through our institutions and our own time. Over the course of the relationships, however, by enacting the forms of situated solidarity that Nagar and Geiger advocate, we have found that our collaborators are quite interested in discussing the theoretical frameworks that inform our work. This interest is born out of a convergence of interests, dreams and goals that are generated through the process of cooperation between scholar activists and their collaborators. Below, we describe how we have attempted to achieve and enact situated solidarities through our own field work in Bangladesh through six practices of scholar-activism. In so doing we are attempting to practice the relational reflexivity that Nagar and Geiger propose, as opposed to the transparent reflexivity they critique (see also Derickson and Routledge 2015, Derickson and MacKinnon forthcoming).

The concept of convergence space as originally articulated by Routledge in 2003 (see also Cumbers, *et al*, 2008; Routledge and Cumbers, 2009) is one such example of the kinds of spaces that might be produced by or productive of the practice of situated solidarities. Convergence spaces act as processual spaces of encounter wherein actors with different time horizons, militant particularisms and scalar frames of reference for political action and forge solidarities (albeit in messy and uneven ways) that are grounded in spaces of similarity and difference (Featherstone, 2012). In such spaces, through face to face interactions, strong tie relations can be fashioned between folk, built on trust, shared experiences and affinities. Convergence spaces are contexts where: 'collective visions' (e.g. unifying values and organisational principles) are articulated that generate common ground between participants; practical relational politics of solidarity are fashioned, including communication, information sharing, and resource mobilization; spatially extensive political action can be facilitated; key activists conduct ideational work to further processes of communication, information sharing and interaction; and contested and uneven power relations are manifested.

In the following sections, we draw on the work of Routledge in Bangladesh, and use a specific example of a convergence space - the Climate Change, Gender and Food Sovereignty Caravan (hereafter, 'Climate Caravan') held in the country in 2011 - to offer some examples of the kinds of situated solidarities we imagine being possible. These are represented by six practices: 'being moved' (by the mission of the collective); 'dispensing power' (to address uneven power relations); 'resourcing potential' (to prioritize capacity over critique); 'resourcing solidarity' (to facilitate communication and spatially extensive political action); 'challenging assumptions and norms' (of particular organizations, for example concerning uneven power relations); and 'sustaining collaboration' (to deepen situated solidarities).

The empirical material is drawn from Routledge's ongoing collaboration with the Bangladesh *Krishok* (farmer) Federation (BKF), the largest rural-based peasant movement in the country, with whom he first started working in 2002. Routledge has practiced scholar-activism in a variety of contexts and with various collaborators for twenty years, and practiced activism before entering academia. His research strategy has involved politically engaged and committed research that is practice-based and conducted in horizontal collaboration with social movements (Routledge, 1996; 2002; Juris, 2007; 2008). While working in India with anti-dam resisters in the Narmada river valley, Routledge attended the second international People's Global Action (PGA) conference in Bangalore, India, in 1999. PGA was an alter-globalization network of peasant and indigenous people that is practice-based and conducted in horizontal collaboration, that inspired Routledge because of its uncompromising anti-capitalist agenda. At the follow-up PGA conference in Cochabamba, Bolivia

in 2001, Routledge began to get to know those (South Asian) activists who had attended and, at their request, volunteered to become one of the facilitators of the PGA (Asia) – the regional coordination of the network. This necessitated working with participant movements of PGA (Asia) to organize events, visit grassroots communities to discuss the composition, function and operation of the network, and facilitate communication processes – in short to foster practices of situated solidarity.

On an initial activist-based networking visit to Bangladesh, Nepal and Indonesia in 2002 to spend time and become more fully acquainted with some of the PGA (Asia) participant movements, Routledge was particularly moved by the hospitality, commitment and direct-action approach of one of those movements, the BKF. He became friends with several of the leadership of the movement, staying with them and their families when he visited Bangladesh. When the BKF took the initiative to host a regional gathering of PGA (Asia) activists, Routledge helped mobilise resources, coordinate, participate in, and provide feedback to participants concerning the weeklong convergence space of Asian peasant movement activists in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2004 (Routledge, 2008). Over time trust relationships have been developed between Routledge and PGA participant movements, especially the BKF, which have enabled productive engagements such as the 'Climate Caravan' in Bangladesh, in 2011 to take place.

However, being based in a U.K. University and attempting to practice situated solidarity is a difficult task, as we have alluded to. Academic institutional structures are increasingly neoliberal in outlook and operation that vitiate against radical *practice* if not writing. For much of Routledge's research he mostly used small grant funding which provided substantial operational flexibility in terms of extending the boundaries of methodological 'norms,' not least in the context of the relational ethics fashioned by collaboration with social movements. The practices of movements and the networks to which they belong have resourced Routledge's thinking on the operational dynamics of international solidarity. Ongoing research since 1992 by Routledge into the spatiality of South Asian social movement practices both within particular places, across space, and within broader solidarity networks led to the conceptualization of social movement networks as 'convergence spaces'. This concept takes its inspiration from the convergence centres that were established at alter-globalization global days of action (e.g. in Seattle 1999 in the protests against the World Trade Organization). These centres were places where activists assembled, strategized and prepared for the protests (Routledge, 2003; Routledge and Cumbers, 2009). Ongoing social movement struggles and practices have informed Routledge's research for the entirety of his career. In particular, a willingness to have one's assumptions and thinking transformed through the practices of situated solidarity has been crucial to the development of his research. This paper is in part an example of this process.

Since 2008, academics in the U.K. are now expected to provide evidence of 'impact' in their research. The Higher Education Funding Council for England has established a framework for assessing research quality in UK universities in order to produce UK-wide indicators of research excellence for all disciplines that could be used to drive the Council's funding for research, and to provide a basis for distributing that funding across the academic sector (Pain *et al*, 2011; Conlon *et al*, 2014). While the 'impact agenda' lends itself more easily to business partnerships and policy interventions, there is also a space for academics to utilize the agenda to pursue scholar-activist collaborations – provided evidence can be supplied that academic's research has had a tangible impact on the lives of their collaborators (Pickerill 2014). For example, Routledge's research and its impacts have informed one another. His role as a facilitator of the People's Global Action (Asia) network led to the concept of 'convergence space' which in turn led to the realisation of the importance to the network of regional conferences for communication, solidarity building and mutually trusting relationships. The research influenced by this realisation highlighted the stated need by civil society organisations in the network to hold an activist caravan to generate further

links between CSOs in the South Asia region.

In the summer of 2009, Routledge conducted a research visit to Bangladesh to conduct collaborative work with the BKF and the BKS. The focus of the visit concerned the impacts of climate change on the already precarious lives of peasant farmers, and how social movements might be able to respond to such challenges. This is because Bangladesh is considered to be one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to climate change and sea level rise (IPCC, 2008). Rising sea levels along its coast is already occurring at a greater rate than the global rate due to global sea level rise and local factors such as tectonic setting, sediment load and subsidence of the Ganges delta (Karim and Mimura, 2008). The south of Bangladesh was flooded in 2007 by Cyclone Sidr, and in 2009 by Cyclone Aila, leaving some of the low-lying coastal agricultural areas contaminated by salt; while in northern Bangladesh the weather is becoming hotter and drier (Interviews, Bangladesh, 2009). The majority of the country's population are poor and dependent on agriculture, and are thus more vulnerable to the impacts of changing climatic regimes, particularly flooding (Dasgupta *et al* 2011). Lack of education and embedded gender discrimination compounds the problem.

Routledge's collaboration with movements - not least around their responses to the challenges posed by climate change - has contributed to the fashioning of international networks and capacity building for the BKF and the BKS, for example through helping to organize network events such as activist conferences and caravans that have provided important 'spaces of encounter' (Routledge, forthcoming) within which representatives of participant movements can meet and interact; discuss issues that pertain to the functioning of the network; develop solidarity through the development of deeper interpersonal ties; coordinate joint actions and resources; develop political strategies and enrol new movements into the network. During the 2009 visit to Bangladesh the idea of a Climate Caravan was discussed by Routledge and some of the BKF leadership and was agreed upon. It is to the practices of situated solidarity by Routledge in the convergence space afforded by the Climate Caravan and some of its impacts that we now turn.

### **Situated solidarities in six practices**

In the following sections, we offer an admittedly partial and imperfect schematic of six forms of grassroots practice based on our experience as scholar-activists and activists in general. We use the example of the convergence space that was the Climate Caravan, to explore these practices and how they embody forms of situated solidarity. It is to each of them that we now turn.

#### *Being Moved*

Butler and Athanasiou (2013) argue that collective action against the economic dispossession associated with poverty and precariousness also necessitates 'being dispossessed', as in a predisposition to relationality (e.g. being moved by others, or self-displacement). This predisposition is at the root of the decision to become a scholar-activist, or to collaborate in the process of knowledge production. Indeed, 'being moved' to collaborate with (non-academic) others is frequently inspired by the collective visions and critiques that we share with our collaborators. For example, Routledge shared the critique of the injustices of neoliberalism and the collective visions articulated by the alter-globalization network PGA and was, as a result, moved to participate in it. The character of his participation (including facilitating communication, information sharing, and resource mobilization) necessitated place based engagements with social movements such as the BKF with whom he developed, over time, a relationship of trust.

However, for young scholars, in order to be moved requires, firstly, not being immobilised at the outset by being overly analytical, or overly cautious. We think it important, given the ongoing economic, political and ecological crises confronting humanity, for aspiring scholaractivists to enter

the logics of an insurrectionary imagination. We need to let our core values (e.g. concerning dignity, self determination, justice) and feelings directly inform our research. This is informed by both personal political values and the need to engage with our emotional responses to the world around us. Scholar-activist engagement frequently emerges from our deep emotional responses to the world. It is our ability to transform our feelings about the world into actions that inspires us to participate in political action (Chatterton *et al* 2008; Routledge, 2012): the experiencing of personal and collective emotions through embodied, relational practices produce political effects (Anderson and Smith 2001; Bennett 2004; Bosco, 2007; Pulido, 2003; Thien 2005).

In particular, and as a response to recent academic concerns with hope (see for example Harvey 2000) we wish to mention the importance of anger as a motivating emotion (Henderson 2008). This is because disruptive emotions such as anger embody political risks that are frequently emotionally engineered by authorities, whether in University settings or within overly political contexts such as demonstrations. Because the “social regulation of anger...generates . . . control scripts in individuals” (Gibbs 2001: no pagination), we need to craft and direct our anger in ways that are effective both for our research and which empower progressive political practices (Butler, 2010; Henderson, 2008). We understand the notion of anger as a motivating force as potential response to ‘post-political’ techniques of governance (see for example Swyngendouw 2006). Of course in the process of crafting anger, we need to acknowledge people’s fears (e.g. concerning employment precarity, masculine norms of confrontation, etc.) and the potential risks involved in rendering oneself vulnerable through anger.

Routledge’s visit to Bangladeshi peasant communities during 2009 generated many conflicting emotions including anger at the lack of government action to support vulnerable peasant communities and sadness at witnessing peasants’ homes severely damaged by cyclones. These emotions were also collectively felt by peasant farmers and activists in the BKF/BKS (Interviews, Bangladesh, 2011). Shared anger at injustice and dispossession motivated Routledge’s decision to collaborate with the BKF/BKS in organizing a convergence space such as the Climate Change, Gender and Food Sovereignty Caravan (hereafter, ‘Climate Caravan’) which was devised as an organisational, educational and solidarity building platform for social movements concerned with the interrelated issues of climate change, food sovereignty and gender. However, the decision to collaborate as a scholar-activist acknowledged Routledge’s privileged positionality (as a white, male, able, Western scholar-activist) and the pronounced differences in physical mobility across space, access to resources such as money and technology etc., between him and most of his collaborators. Further, the political, economic and cultural legacies of British colonialism feed into contemporary contexts and intersect with political opportunities, processes and relations that operate across space: as an academic from a British University Routledge could also usually obtain an entry visa to an Asian country without problems, and English is frequently the *lingua franca* amongst Asian activists etc. (see Nast 1994, Routledge 2002; 2008). Acknowledging these privileges, the practices of scholar activism attempt to work to deconstruct them, in an attempt to disperse power, which brings us to the second practice.

### *Dispersing Power*

Situated solidarity necessitates challenging traditional roles, hierarchies, and the general order of things. This can involve breaking down of boundaries between the traditional identities of ‘academic’ and ‘activist’ (Routledge, 1996) and between the University and the community in which it is located, while recognizing the difficulties of working between vocations or what Khasnabish and Haiven term a ‘strategy of avocation’ (2012: 409). In this sense, scholaractivism involves a politics of ‘dispersing power’ (Zibechi, 2010) – away from academia, and in the form of connection, cooperation and communication with community activists. The practice of dispersing power attempts to dismantle the ‘fences’ that separate those with access to resources from those who don’t, as well as

the fences that reside in the minds of scholaractivists (see Klein, 2002), for example concerning assumptions about who produces knowledge, and how and from where that knowledge is transferred. Although some form of uneven power relations are usually present within convergence spaces (not least between scholar activists and their collaborators, see Routledge 2002; 2008), the practice of situated solidarity requires that such considerations not undermine the goal of putting scholar activist skills, knowledge and material resources to work in the interest of effecting social change amongst those with whom we collaborate.

For example, the purpose of the Climate Caravan's was to educate and mobilise vulnerable peasant communities about the effects of climate change, and facilitate movement-to-movement communication and sharing of experiences and strategies. The Caravan comprised three buses travelling in convoy containing eighty activists: fifty-five BKF and BKS activists from various districts from Bangladesh, and twenty-five activists from grassroots movements in India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Philippines. The Caravan visited eighteen villages in twelve districts of Northern and Southern Bangladesh, engaging with BKF/BKS-organised peasant and indigenous communities. It intended to deepen and extend networks of grassroots movements in South Asia and build international solidarity around specific campaigns concerning issues of climate change, gender and food sovereignty. This was achieved through different spaces of encounter such as workshops, seminars and rallies that sought to break down spatial barriers between activists both within and beyond Bangladesh.

The practice of situated solidarity took the form of Routledge acting as a facilitator of many of the workshops and seminars (see Kitchen and Fuller, 2004), wherein such events utilized his knowledge of such pedagogic practices while also providing spaces for the articulation of peasant knowledges. For example, farmers discussed how agricultural practices were being disrupted because of the changing frequency and character of the Monsoon, as a local peasant organiser noted:

"The frequency of the Monsoon has also changed. It is affecting planting practices and we are seeing an increase in pests in the dry weather. Also the character of the monsoon has changed. It is increasingly unpredictable. Our planting of *padi* is being disturbed by the Monsoon changes (Interview, Barguna District, Bangladesh, 2009)."

Folk in grassroots communities and social movements are self-reflexive, producing their own knowledges, not least about the possibilities and limits of agency and structure within particular societies (Juris 2008a; Melucci 1989; 1996; Chesters, 2012). An important element of ethnographic engagement is to move beyond the acquisition, cataloguing, ordering, and the publishing of information towards jointly producing knowledge with resisting others to produce critical interpretations and readings of the world that are accessible, understandable to all those involved, and which can inform participants' subsequent actions in community organizations (Chatterton, Fuller and Routledge 2008, Sangtin Writers Collective and Richa Nagar, 2006). Situated solidarity was enacted by Routledge through the facilitation of peasant dialogues and testimonies, in attempts to disperse power associated with difference, in terms of who speaks and whose knowledge is valued. Caravan workshops and seminars thus provided the space for the articulation of popular, counter-hegemonic common sense as peasant testimonies discussed changing weather patterns; the impacts of extreme weather events upon agricultural practices; landlessness and debt; and transformations taking place in Bangladesh's agriculture. In its attempts to disperse power and facilitate the articulation of peasant knowledges, the practice of scholar activism also attempts to resource potential, to which we now turn.

### *Resourcing Potential*

There is tendency in academia to be critical rather than collaborative. Zygmunt Bauman (1992) has

argued that for many in academia 'reality' - be it the realm of culture, politics, or economics - is 'an object of study, something to be mastered only cognitively, as a meaning, and not practically, as a task' (1992: 23). The relative autonomy of intellectual discourse is highly valued by academics, and according to Bauman, staunchly defended 'against the rebels from its own ranks who jeopardize the comforts of freedom, drawing the dusty skeleton of political commitment out of the old family cupboard' (*ibid*: 16). Further, Pierre Bourdieu (1998) has argued that it is academic's desire to preserve their (relative) privileges within society - e.g. their relative intellectual autonomy - that contributes to academics' lack of engagement in struggles (and thereby their complicit support of the established order). Academics primarily engage in discursive politics, mounting various representational challenges to dominant discourses. However, the sites of such representation - conferences, academic journals, universities - tend to confirm academia as site of elite privilege; and intellectual discourse as the language of the dominant and marginal to the majority of people's everyday lives and concerns. Moreover, the politics of such representational challenges are safely sequestered within sites and practices that do not pose material challenges to the existing order not least because their privileges are in part maintained by the continuation of that order. Such representational challenges, while important, (e.g. in teaching) are, for the majority of people involved in struggles simply irrelevant (see Routledge, 2001).

Therefore, one of the key tasks of scholar-activism is to attempt to find, generate and resource potential rather than only provide intellectual critique, in order to contribute to practices that are aimed at social transformation rather than merely the "production of knowledge" and/or the "solving" of "local" problems (see also Chatterton, Fuller and Routledge, 2008). The aim is to put into practice principles of solidarity, equality, pluralism and horizontality so as to resource the potential to establish counter-power to the alienation and dislocation associated with contemporary capitalism. In part this involves the politics of prefiguration that theorizes action through doing, fashioning alternatives through lived practice (e.g. see Graeber, 2002; Maeckelbergh, 2011), while also recognizing that such practices constantly require the negotiation of unequal power relations (see Routledge, 2002; Chatterton *et al* 2008). Further, resourcing potential can contribute to the creation of a "radical imagination" whereby people can begin to envision better, more socially just futures, based on the analysis of the root causes of social problems (Khasnabish and Haiven, 2012).

The Climate Caravan was an attempt to resource and nurture potential counter-power and counter-discourse to the corporatization of agriculture through strengthening and developing solidarities between small farmers both within and beyond Bangladesh. Since the early 1990's the government of Bangladesh has implemented structural adjustment programmes, including trade liberalization of agriculture, involving withdrawal of input subsidies, privatization of fertilizer distribution and seed production, and elimination of rural rationing and price subsidies (Murshid, no date). These have increased farmers' indebtedness and landlessness as they struggle to secure the capital to pay for expensive agricultural inputs.

Peasant farmer counter power was articulated through the discourse of food sovereignty. While definitions of food sovereignty vary between organizations and activist networks, have changed over time, and contain inconsistencies, common themes have emerged such as direct democratic participation and agrarian reform, implying peasant control over territory, biodiversity (commons) and means of (food) production; self governance; ecological sustainability; the articulation of cultural difference, etc. and these have acted as a point of encounter, common interest and solidarity between farmer's movements and international farmers' networks such as *La Via Campesina* (the peasant way, LVC) to which BKF/BKS belong (e.g. Patel, 2009 and also see Rosset, 2003; Windfuhr and Jonsen, 2005; Holt-Gimenez and Patel, 2009). Moreover, the struggle for food sovereignty itself is part of a broader struggle for communities to construct peasant sovereignty over territory, culture and material resources (Masioli and Nicholson, 2010). Routledge's role was to facilitate and help



resource the potential for increased dialogues, interaction, connection and solidarity between different peasant farmers and activists from different parts of South Asia. Situated solidarity was enacted through his ideational labour in the form of developing the content of some of the Caravan workshops, facilitating discussions within those workshops, and sharing information with peasant communities about his research on the effects of climate change and the potential benefits of food sovereignty. Workshop encounters and dialogues contribute to the development of trust, common ground and mutual interests that provide the potential for future convergence spaces to be fashioned wherein situated solidarities can be further deepened. For example, one of the outcomes of the Climate Caravan was to plan future meetings between farmers (in 2012, in Kathmandu, Nepal during an regional LVC convergence; and 2013 in Jakarta, Indonesia during an international LVC convergence) with the purpose of holding a more ambitious caravan across India, Nepal and Bangladesh that was held in late in 2014.

### *Resourcing solidarity*

Prolonged engagement between activists and scholar-activists resource both material (e.g. physical resources) and immaterial production (e.g. knowledge) and create space and time for communities/social movements that they cannot always provide for themselves (Khasnabish and Haiven, 2012), particularly when the objective is to jointly produce knowledge that is accessible to all those involved and which can inform participants' subsequent actions in community organizations (Chatterton *et al* 2008). Beyond the mobilization of knowledge and the generation of specific resources, new spaces of encounter can utilize research methods and relational ethics of struggle (Routledge, 2002) to resource the practice of prefiguration: bringing the future desired into being by creating something that would not otherwise exist and generating moments of possibility for the nurturing of solidarity (Khasnabish and Haiven, 2012).

Such nurturance implies resourcing the conditions in which a spatially extensive politics can be articulated. Routledge worked with the BKF over the course of two years to help resource the Climate Caravan. Practices of solidarity were situated within the logistical and organisational needs of the Caravan before, during and after the event. Situated solidarity enacted by by Routledge prior to the Climate Caravan required the production of usable knowledge for the BKF and its connection to a material politics of social change, for example Routledge's academic skills helped to shape funding proposals in order to resource the Caravan, and part of his research on the impacts of climate change on the lives of Bangladeshi farmers was used by the BKF in its information booklet provided to all participants in the Caravan. Routledge's facilitating and teaching skills were recognised and trusted by BKF/BKS activists and deployed during the Caravan workshops and seminars. He also documented the Caravan's activities for post-Caravan funder's reports.

While the practices of such situated solidarity endowed Routledge with a range of authorial and organisational 'powers,' these were precisely what movement activists required to enable the Caravan to be conducted in the ways that they wished. The Caravan events were created to attempt to draw upon the self-activity of peasant communities (e.g. local understandings and experiences concerning farming practices and perceptions of changing climates) because these are important spaces of knowledge production about the world (Escobar 2008) as noted above.

Moreover, situated solidarities developed between Routledge and social movement activists during earlier articulated moments of convergence spaces – such as PGA gatherings in India, Bolivia and Bangladesh (mentioned above) – contributed to deciding which movements would be included in the Climate Caravan. By bringing activists from Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Europe and Australia together, the Climate Caravan contributed to resourcing solidarity building. For example, the Caravan helped to deepen solidarity ties within the BKF and BKS through the increased cohesion between movement members from different districts in the country

(Interview, Dhaka, 2011). This was facilitated through the Climate Caravan bringing different activists from different districts onto the Climate Caravan where they met with fellow BKF and BKS activists in other districts and spoke about their experiences during the Climate Caravan's events. The Climate Caravan also contributed to the fashioning of solidarity between movements. The participation of activists from farmers' movements from India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and the Philippines on the Caravan provided an opportunity for peasants to share experiences from their different movements' struggles and national contexts; meet with Bangladeshi peasants; explore how they might create bi-lateral campaigns with the BKF/BKS; fashion joint campaigns with other movements; and take their experiences back to their own countries and struggles (Interviews, North and South Bangladesh, 2011). The Caravan enabled the translocal diffusion (of ideas, tactics, strategies etc.) between different sites and social actors, bridging cultural and geographic divides (Bandy and Smith, 2005), and facilitated solidarity between movements. The mutual constitution of situated solidarities and convergence spaces and their processual character was summed up by an Indian activist:

*"We have formed relationships, deepened networking ties, and we have begun to plan future actions together. I think it was encouraging for communities to see an international presence, and that others care about the problems of people in Bangladesh and want to learn from them. This is solidarity (Interview, Satkhira District, 2011)."*

Practices of situated solidarity here works to create spaces of encounter, resource productive dialogues and in so doing challenge assumptions and norms, our next practice.

### *Challenging assumptions and norms*

Any community-university collaboration brings centuries of baggage with it. Some communities feel "studied to death" and assume most university-based personnel represent more of the same colonizing knowledge production regimes, while others feel overlooked, or cannot recognize their own values, priorities, and concerns in much academic research. Those inclined toward scholaractivism might assume communities are not interested in collaboration, or that traditional sites of knowledge production have little to offer given their fraught, and at times insidious, past. Interrogating these assumptions collaboratively provides an opportunity to learn from and push beyond this rut.

In particular, scholar-activists need to challenge their own assumptions about academics' 'power'. Certainly, as academics we are entangled within broader powers of association and intellectual production - such as the institutions that employ us and/or fund our research, and their location within hierarchies of privilege - that may grant us certain economic, political, and representational securities and advantages that may not be enjoyed by those with whom we collaborate - not least economically marginalized communities in Bangladesh (Routledge, 2002). We are frequently in a position of power by virtue of our ability to name research categories, control information about the research agenda, shape the character of our practices and come and go as researchers (Staeheli and Lawson 1995).

However, a range of 'powers' are involved in the process of scholar-activist collaboration. For example, the power to define the field of collaboration can belong as much (if not more) to our collaborators as a result of their local knowledge that potentially can grant them a certain power over the construction of the forms, parameters and dynamics of the collaboration. Scholaractivists are frequently dependent upon information, research contacts, advice, and the good graces of our collaborators, and can be positioned within their collaborators' broader strategies and agendas (Routledge, 2002). Nevertheless, situated solidarity practices by scholar-activists can also contribute to the challenging of activist assumptions. For example, through discussions and workshops about

food sovereignty practices, the Caravan attempted to generate new thinking about agricultural practices and climate change and spaces of encounter between peasant farmers. At these encounters, Routledge (and others) discussed human generated causes of climate change. Following a workshop in a cyclone-affected Patuakhali District, community participants commented how little they had known about climate change before the Climate Caravan workshop:

*People had thought that Cyclones Sidr and Aila were a curse from God rather than an outcome of lifestyles in the Global North. The Caravan has motivated people to respond to climate change in their communities (Interview, Patuakhali District, 2011).*

This is important because, in the past, the belief that cyclones and other extreme events are acts of God has contributed to the reluctance of coastal residents to respond to cyclone warnings, resulting in fatalities (Haque, 1995; Alam and Collins, 2010; Paul and Dutt, 2010).

These kinds of encounters can generate dialogical contacts that enable activist assumptions to be open up for analysis and negotiation. While concerns about power relations can render scholaractivists disinclined to voice even the slightest critique of activist practice, in our experience, thoughtful engagement carefully articulated once collaborative relationships have been established can be quite productive.

For example, during the Climate Caravan there were clear inequalities of participation between male and female activists, reflecting gendered responsibilities that influenced the level of women's participation in the Climate Caravan - when and where women were able to participate - and over-determined the form of their participation. The timings of Caravan meetings were frequently inconvenient for women, owing to the gendered division of labour that positions them as housewives (rather than workers) and requires them to cook for the family as well look after children and attend to unforeseen events such as sickness, family problems etc. Even when women attended workshops and seminars, they frequently had to leave early for the same reason (see Routledge forthcoming).

Situated solidarity here required challenging BKF assumptions and norms about BKS participation. At the evaluation meeting following the end of the Climate Caravan in Dhaka (held between BKF and BKS activists and a four international activists including Routledge), the gendered assumptions that influenced levels of female participation in the Caravan were discussed and the need for more gender balance and female participation in future Caravan programmes was recognized. Moreover, it was put to BKF activists that women's participation in solidarity-building initiatives such as the Climate Caravan is not enough. Rather, it is the character of that participation and its potentially transformative effects on women's mobility, self-esteem, emotional wellbeing, and consciousness that should be key in future initiatives. Situated solidarities imply the willingness to be transformed, and the dialogues held after the Caravan were productive. Hence, while the BKS has women cadre emerging from their ranks they remain lacking in the English language skills, which are crucial as the *lingua franca* of transnational social movement organising in Asia. This has been recognised by both BKF and BKS and is beginning to be addressed by six-month activist training programmes in English language, computer and movement organising skills for women and men, particularly to increase women's active involvement in international activist encounters, for example in LVC (e.g. see Routledge, forthcoming). In this sense, knowledge produced through collaboration between scholar activists and activists has been generative and can contribute to sustaining collaboration between scholar-activists and grassroots communities. It is to this final practice that we now turn.

### *Sustaining collaboration*

Scholar-activism informed by a politics of resourcefulness (Derickson and Routledge, 2015) is

concerned with enabling and engendering sustained participation in forms of engagement and activism by everyday people. For example, our experiences suggest that the communities with which we collaborate are interested in engaging in knowledge exchange with scholars with whom they have relationships of trust and mutuality born out of situated solidarities developed through convergence spaces fashioned during earlier collaborations (such as the PGA Asia activist conference in Dhaka in 2004) and research visits. The form that these engagements take (planning meetings, public gatherings, workshops etc.) are a crucial dimension of scholar-activist inquiry, rather than just the backdrop against which the 'real stuff' plays out. This is particularly true in places and contexts where meeting the minimum needs for social reproduction is itself a struggle. For example, shared meals are formative rituals that, through situated face-to-face processes of communication help establish bonds between folk. They facilitate the exchange of experiences and ideas between activists and enable strategies to be developed in secure spaces. They enable connections and exchanges between folk to be made, and such interrelations can shape political identities and imaginaries, for example through the recognition of common opponents and common ground.

Moreover, they provide an opportunity, beyond particular actions, for folk to social generate emotional energy, and fashion oppositional discourses. The interpersonal communication, exchange of information, coordination of future actions, the development of mutual support, and the mobilization of collective resources all help to develop situated solidarities. Face to face communication is usually fairly secure, can generate trust, is creative and can lead to processes of emergence (see Juris, 2008a; Routledge and Cumbers, 2009). Such communication needs to be dialogical rather than declarative, maintain openness rather than closure, and be exploratory rather than defensive in character.

At the most prosaic level, the eating of meals together during the Climate Caravan, for example, was crucially important for a range of reasons. First, of course, food provides ongoing nutritional sustenance to the participants. Second, the meals provided important times and spaces for the organisers of the Caravan to discuss the next day's programme and logistics and act to make changes and adaptations where appropriate. Third, the meals provided important times and spaces for international activists to share personal experiences, get to know one another, and develop bonds of trust and friendship as crucial precursors to solidarity building within the South Asia region. Finally, the meals were sourced by the BKF/BKS and cooked by predominantly female activists in the villages where the caravan events took place and where the caravan participants slept. These meals were symbolically important for several reasons: they highlighted the gendered division of labour mentioned earlier; they consisted of locally sourced food (important given the food sovereignty element of the Caravan); and enabled poorly resourced peasants to provide for the Caravan participants in keeping with traditional cultural norms whereby guests are always housed and well-fed as noted by a BKS activist: " we purchased food and did the cooking...this was an important part of the Caravan...this is practical food sovereignty" (Interview, Patuakhali district, 2011).

In short, such practices help to fashion and sustain interpersonal bonds of solidarity. For example Routledge and activists from several of the participant movements in the Caravan held some impromptu meetings during mealtimes to discuss the planning for a regional meeting of LVC activists that was to take place in Kathmandu, Nepal in 2012. This was important because activist wanted to use the opportunity of the LVC meeting to begin to plan the follow-up Caravan mentioned earlier. In this way the practices and processes of scholar activism and the situated solidarities that they engender tend to extend beyond the particular times and places of their enactment to seed future spaces of convergence and encounter.

### **Situated solidarities and the practice of scholar activism**

We have suggested possible practices for scholar-activists and aspiring scholar-activists who are faced with the struggles, dilemmas and institutional disincentives of attempting to balance the vicissitudes of activism, the resourcing of research collaborators, *and* the writing of either successful PhD's or publishable research papers. Drawing upon the notion of situated solidarities we have suggested ways that scholar-activists can engage in (hopefully) fulfilling activism and contribute meaningfully to academic debates. We have revisited the notion of convergence space because such spaces provide contexts where such situated solidarities might be constructively fostered. In particular, we have argued that scholar activism can perform at least six types of useful practice. These different yet entangled practices provide some preliminary means or tools that enable spaces of convergence to be fashioned within which resourceful scholar-activism might take place. This is important, we believe, because much of what passes as critical human geography is distinctly apolitical. This is hardly surprising since the neoliberal character of contemporary university environments actively discourage politically engaged research (as 'unscientific' or 'subjective'), and place enormous pressures, demands and expectations on doctoral students and early career researchers. However, in the ongoing conjuncture of economic and ecological crisis, struggle is the need of the hour the 'dignity that is below and to the left' (Marcos, 2012). Of course situated solidarities face ongoing problems and dilemmas. First, there are tensions in the field, where the goals and responsibilities of researchers and activists do not necessarily coincide (e.g. where we disagree with our collaborators). Second, the moving back and forth between activist and academic sites can lead to a range of logistical and positional dilemmas (Routledge, 1996). Third, there are different modes of knowledge production and different types of knowledge between the scholar and the activist (Juris and Khasbanish, 2013). However, we believe that the different practices that we have presented can be used as a heuristic device to think about various moments in a campaign or struggle as opportunities for forging solidarities that can serve as the basis for productive scholar activist engagement.

Such practices enable us to think about the act of movement building, rather than take as given the already existing public/civic/activist body. In so doing, we participate in the act of calling in to being a particular 'collaborative manufacture' (Goffman, 1956) between scholar activists and activists. In this sense we see scholar activism as productive and constructive, not critically distant. In so doing we acknowledge the challenges of movement building and the always negotiated and situated positionality of scholar activists within such processes. However, we believe that the scholar activist practices that we have discussed provide possible opportunities from which to produce positive contributions to everyday politics of contention.

---

**Paul Routledge, Kate Driscoll Derickson**

[Click here](#) to download the article as pdf

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

---

**P.S.**

<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/88854/1/Situated%20solidarities%20final%20edit.pdf>