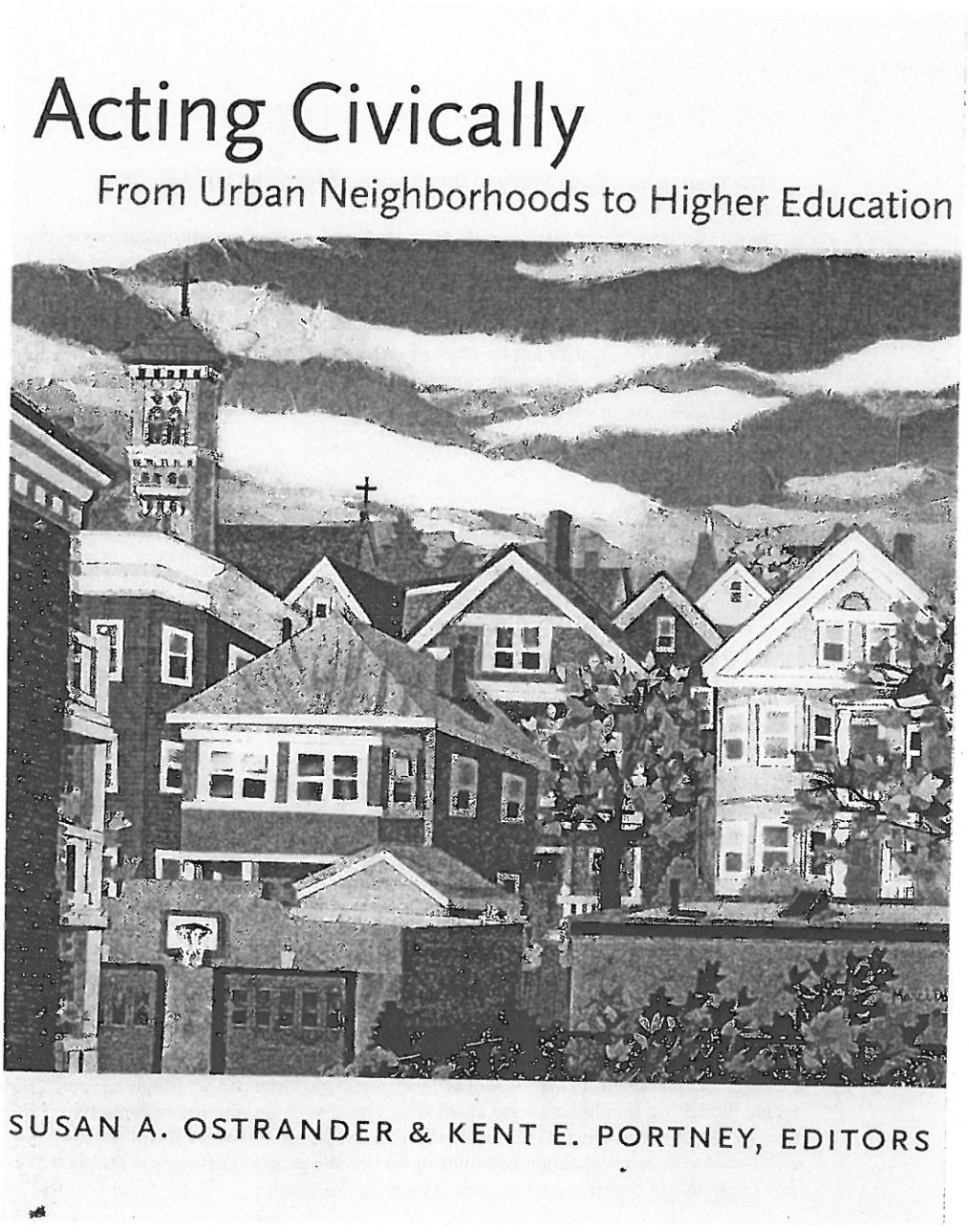
In the book *Acting Civically: From Urban Neighborhoods to Higher Education*, Jean Wu, Senior Lecturer in American Studies at Tufts University, wrote a chapter entitled "Race Matters in Civic Engagement Work". In this chapter, she chronicles her creation of a course in which students studied issues of race and social justice while working in placements in the Boston Chinatown community. Dr. Wu quotes journal entries and emails from students as they progress through the course. Please read the following excerpt which includes one example from each of the six phases she identifies.*

*Please note that these are excerpts from the chapter: for each phase, there are several quotations, and there is more text.



Excerpted from page 161

Six years ago, I had the opportunity to design and teach a college-level course in which enrolled students would work regularly in Boston Chinatown on community-designated projects at nonprofit organizations, as well as participate in a weekly university seminar in which they learned theory and reflected on practice. I entitled the course "Active Citizenship in an Urban Community: Race, Culture, Power, and Politics." Its stated goal was to help students acquire the practical skills, competencies, and habits of mind to be effective and ethical lifelong community participants, working for a more just society. Objectives included (1) familiarizing students with the racial, economic, and political history of the community; (2) teaching them how to identify the contemporary problems confronted by the community; (3) analyzing the systems of inequality operating in the creation and maintenance of those problems; and (4) helping them develop strategies for working in and with community partners to confront the issues through direct service and advocacy. Students were expected to be willing to address community concerns through studying and applying theories, engaging in the kinds of activities assigned by community organizations, and ultimately reflecting on their practice.

Excerpted from page 162

The Course as a Case Study in the Process of Teaching and Learning

In this section, I employ excerpts from students' written communications to me during their involvement with the course in order to illustrate patterns of thinking, feeling, analyzing, and synthesizing that can emerge from a civic learning experience of this sort. Each student communication I have selected is also representative of a significant number of others across the six years I have taught this course. Communications range from the occasional electronic message to weekly entries in course journals and field notes. For each excerpt, I include the student's racial identity location.

Excerpted from page 163

Phase 1: Before the Course Begins

As courses with required community involvement are relatively uncommon in the undergraduate curriculum at my institution, I receive many inquiries about the course before the first class. The following electronic mail from one student requesting information about the course is representative of an attitude I often see in students deciding whether or not to enroll:

Hello Professor, I am told this course is about volunteering in Chinatown so I am not sure why the course subtitle is: RACE, CULTURE, POWER, AND POLITICS. Doesn't Chinatown have Chinese people in it? So why would we be talking about race and power? I can see how culture would be relevant. Actually, I want to find out what we will be reading ahead of time because I hope we do not talk about things like race and power. I had a lot of these discussions in high school and they just go nowhere and set people against people. I think we should be talking about what's positive. I am sure the students who want to take this class are not interested in race issues but are full of good will and energy. I want to be learning about the culture of the Chinese people. That's one of the reasons I want to take the course. (Latino male junior)

I hazard a guess that most readers would agree with me that were this student considering a course involving students working in a predominantly black or African American community, it is unlikely he would have made exactly the same statement. He might still have stated that he did not wish to discuss race and power in a "volunteer service" course, but he would not have questioned that race, if not power, existed and was relevant to working within a black community in the United States. In the context of a course based in an Asian American community, however, this student's confusion is not extraordinary. Contemporary racial discourse in the United States continues to be dominated by a black/white paradigm (Ancheta 1993), even though race in the United States has never been limited to black and white, either historically or in the present. From the perspective of the black/white paradigm, Asian Americans—neither black nor white—are frequently considered to be not "raced." In addition, it is a deeply embedded habit of mind in the United States to see Asians, regardless of their naturalization status, as "foreign" and "not American." The "difference" that being Asian represents is thereby relegated to a matter of "culture." In this case, it is, of course, a culture considered "foreign" to that of the United States; that is, a culture that is non-American. "American culture" is nearly always, if not always, referred back to a white European-based tradition.

Excerpted from pages 164-165

Phase 2: First Contact with the Community

One of the first assignments that enrolled students must carry out is a "mapping" exercise in Chinatown. Students are dropped off in pairs at a central point in the community with a set of questions to be answered through observation and interaction with individuals that they encounter. And one of the first content lessons students receive is a formal orientation to the community, in which community-based cultural and political workers are their teachers. As students share their reactions to both learning activities, it becomes clear that ignorance about the realities of the community does not prevent students from holding and voicing some strongly preformed stereotypes and beliefs about the community and its residents.

A white European American student wrote:

> My image of the Chinese as very self-sufficient and clan-like is supported by the experience of walking around the community during our mapping exercise. They do not want to talk to outsiders, and though my mapping partner is Asian, she also got the brush-off. The people who did not speak English looked at us with curiosity but also with what I felt to be distrust or suspicion. I can see it's going to be difficult to break into the community since there is not much friendliness (I am comparing it to what I think I would get if I were a stranger asking for information in my own community [an upper-middle-class, predominantly white suburb southwest of Boston], and I think people would be eager to share information about the community). But I have heard that Chinese are culturally reserved, so I should not judge too much right now.

Excerpted from page 166 (referring to this example and three others)

The four statements quoted above suggest that students, regardless of their own racial locations, can come to civic engagement endeavors full of alarmingly misleading information, biases, stereotypes, and myths about the community and people they will engage with. It may be obvious to many readers that what the students put forth mirrors the misinformation, cultural essentialisms, and racial biases circulating in the larger society with reference to Asian Americans and "the Chinese." But it is equally important to note how their

statements point to the glaring lack of any formal history and theory that might inform their attempts to make sense of lived realities very different from their own. Critical thinking and analytical skills are extremely limited. What gets drawn on are their own embedded assumptions and values, shaped by personal family experiences, popular myths, racial location, and socioeconomic class status, just to list the most important items of influence.

Excerpted from page 167

Phase 3: Studying Systems of Inequality, Community History and Contemporary Realities

Early in the semester, while students are having their formal community orientations, they study the histories of Asian America in general and Boston Chinatown in particular, and they learn how to analyze current community conditions and politics by applying theories of race and economics. Toward the third week of the semester, the most common student response to the curriculum is one of shock or astonishment. The following responses illustrate the different areas in which students find themselves taken by surprise, as if unaware of their own preconceptions.

An African American student wrote about the almost universal surprise of discovering that Asian America is American, that Asians are raced in the United States, and that they experience racism:

I had no idea that I was going to be learning about racism, and then institutionalized racism and environmental racism. I guess I had thought of this course as my "relax" course this semester—a way to get away from campus and do something fun in a cultural community. I have other courses in American history and environmental issues, and this course actually fits tightly with those, except I had never thought of Chinatown as "American" in its history and never realized it even suffered any racism!! What a surprise! I don't think I'm going to be able to relax in this course though!!!

Most students are also startled to find that Chinatowns across the nation have a long history in America and are residential enclaves born out of anti-Asian racial exclusion.

Excerpted from page 169

Phase 4: Working in the Community

Students start working in the community a month into the semester. The readings, reflections, and analyses required up to this point have given them a basic knowledge of the history and contemporary issues in the community and of theories of race, racism, and systems of inequality, as well as a few opportunities to apply what they have learned to analyses of their own social locations and core values with regard to systems of inequality. As students begin their work in the field, they commonly find themselves trying to navigate unfamiliar terrain. Some face language and cultural barriers; some face a lack of resources to engage in the assigned tasks; and all experience insecurity in the face of ambiguity about the criteria by which they will be judged on their sensitivity to the community and their competence in practice. Thus, while students have by this point developed a fledgling awareness of their own race and class privileges and of several basic stereotypes and myths targeting Asians, immigrants, and low-income communities, their first true encounters with the activities of civic engagement usually lead to a further surfacing of their own deeply held biases as they are pushed out of their "comfort zones" of social expectation.

A bilingual Asian American student assigned to assist in services to new immigrants wrote:

I started doing taxes for immigrants today. I have never been so frustrated in my life. I find out that after attending hours of tax-prep training for this, the software I learned at the tax center cannot be used with the computer at the agency. The agency computers are way too old. So my supervisor asked me to do my work by hand. I was panicked. The doors opened, and immediately the lines formed, and most were older women.

I was very disturbed and irritated when the older immigrant women wanted me to "just do" their taxes for them. I thought you're supposed to teach someone to fish instead of giving them the fish. That's what I learned in my high school volunteer program. I think people *should* learn to help themselves. I thought they would be curious as to how to do it and want to learn so that they are not dependent on others doing it. But when I asked them to look at the forms with me, they became agitated—and pushed it at me—saying "just do it," and "I don't want to learn this, what if I do it wrong?" When the time came for the end of my 3 hour session, I tried to tell those still in line that I had to go and if they would come back another day, someone else would help them. They got panicked and said "Just do mine—I can't take time from work again." I never expected them to be so aggressive and demanding. They seem to be demonstrating a kind of "small" mentality that is very Chinese—just take care of me. I've heard that immigrants should be forced to learn English and use it, and this is a case where it is very true.

Excerpted from page 172

Phase 5: Revelations and Reevaluations

By the middle of the second semester of the course, five to six months after their initial contact with the community, most students have had ample opportunity to gain theoretical knowledge as well as more particular insight into their own social locations and values through structured reflection on and analysis of their experiences in the field. Students have thus begun to feel much more involved in their community contexts and to infuse their work with their own talents and creativity. Their reflections on civic learning at this point frequently refer to "what they did not know" when they started the course. They speak about which parts of the curriculum they found most useful in correcting previously held biases. Frequently, they mention titles and authors of readings that were critical in transforming their thinking, as well as activities that led them to seek alternative explanations for their encounters. Their reflections give us valuable insight into what could be not just useful but even necessary components of effective civic engagement curriculum and pedagogy.

The student who had complained about the cleanliness of the community in a quotation given above offered this reflection:

I complained a lot about how dirty Chinatown was and how little people there seemed to care about their environment, but what I am learning about environmental racism in urban areas like the Chinatown community has totally blown me away. I never even included the city in my consideration of environment before now—it was the forests and rivers—and I had never thought of the word "racism" attached to environmental issues. I am seeing how race and especially race and class combined are so absolutely at the center of this issue. Who are the people who get to make environmental policy? Who are the people who get to choose where they want to live? Why should it surprise us that a community that is almost 100% new immigrant, with language and cultural barriers, with one of the lowest income brackets in the city, is always targeted for all the mess that people who have clout and money know how to avoid in their communities? I think these issues are right in front of our nose, except that unless we are *forced* to see them, we don't.

Phase 6: Reflections on a Year of Civic Learning

Finally, I turn to students' reflections at the end of their yearlong experience of civic engagement and learning. A few themes repeatedly emerge from students' written communications. Students comment frequently on the absence of information about systems of inequality in their formal education. They are able to identify these systems and analyze how they operate, and they recognize how they themselves are implicated within the systems. They identify the process of civic learning that has led them to transformed perceptions of themselves and of the community and its residents. Many students, especially seniors, share informed reconsiderations of their career and life choices.

A white European American student reflected on how his overall education had failed to provide him with critical knowledge about systems of inequality and teach the dangers of uninformed, well-intentioned "good works":

> I am one of those people who went to a diverse school and did a lot with diversity education in the school. One thing I never learned till working specifically in this community and taking the course is that racism can be expressed in very different forms. I never learned about the institutional kind of racism, the kind that you can't see because it is just in the way that things are set up and done—in policies and laws and practices. I guess I did grow up on a diet that said that racism is mostly concentrated in those that are ignorant, uneducated, and that it's about being afraid of and hating or looking down on those that are different from you, but I realize that I never really figured out what drove it other than warped human nature. And so it is with both relief and terror that I am beginning to understand that racism is "a system of advantage based on race," that it is not just ignorant people being mean. I never saw how embedded things are in the structures of our society. So even good intentioned people like me, like other students in this class, could actually be performing out of racism and not even realize it. This is something entirely new to me. I think I've never understood this aspect of service—it's not about cleaning the streets, teaching English, getting people out to vote—I mean it is about all of these things, but that they are really individual pieces that only make real sense if you group them under the kind of action that seeks to fight to stop racism acted on one community by larger society around it.

Excerpted from pages 176-177

Ruminations on What I Have Learned and Where We Need to Go

Civic engagement is the most recent expression of the historic liberal arts mission of preparing students for public life as civic participants (Latham 2003). I want to think that we have become involved in our work as scholars and teachers because one of our main goals is to swell the numbers of individuals in the generations to come who are not only willing but also intellectually and practically skilled enough to make a lifelong ethical commitment to working with communities and populations most marginalized so that in the end all involved are empowered to create more just societies. While the last few student statements in the prior section might give us some hope that our efforts toward this goal are not entirely futile, much remains to be done.

I have learned from the students I have worked with in the last six years that the transformations they underwent over the duration of the course could not have occurred without a curriculum and pedagogy "forcing" them to study community history and systems of inequality. Their comments and reflections all suggest that had they engaged in community work alone, without the more academically oriented work that helped them see the conditions they encountered in the broader context of institutionalized injustice in our society, the risk would

have been very high that their experiences would have reinforced the embedded biases, assumptions, misinformation, and ignorance pervading U.S. society and, thus, their own knowledge base. Civic engagement educators and their community partners are all too familiar with a common scenario in civic engagement teaching and learning in which the unexamined biases and values that students (and teachers) bring with them into a community context result in negative interactions that engender conflict, avoidance, patronization, or moralization.

The result is that "well-meaning" teachers and learners avoid—perhaps even strongly oppose—further forays beyond the traditional classroom into unfamiliar communities. Community partners, already stretched thin for human and material resources, find themselves suffering from the loss of time and energy they have spent educating and nurturing both outside learners and a community-academic partnership. The expectations they had that their academic partners would "do no harm" are thus shattered. Plans and projects are stalled or aborted, contributing to the development of a great deal of cynicism about any positive role for the academy and academics in the community.

I have also learned from students who caution that absent an understanding of the systems that reproduce inequality, even "positive" civic engagement work may leave underlying problematic values and gaps of knowledge unchallenged. For example, students could have a very successful experience of cleaning up neighborhoods and creating more green space in a community without ever being challenged in their belief that the residents in the neighborhood do not care about the physical environment and ultimately are the ones to blame for any poor conditions they live in. Students might therefore never come to understand institutionalized environmental racism that targets certain communities for "beautification" and others with unwanted toxic waste. Explicit theoretical instruction integrated into civic engagement education is necessary to avoid these destructive endings.

Jean Y. Wu, "Race Matters in Civic Engagement Work" in Acting Civically: From Urban Education to Higher Education, ed. Susan A. Ostrander and Kent E. Portney ((Medford: Tufts University Press, 2007) 158-182