

(Un)Rigging the Literacy Game: Political Literacies that Challenge Econocide

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KEYWORDS

econocide, community literacy, Dominant discourse, gentrification, prison writing community

We want development, but we don't want to be pushed out!

—*Nannie Hinkston, Anti-Gentrification Neighborhood Activist*

“t's so easy to block off those so-called criminals, and they're away from us, they're not with us. We don't even have to be tolerant, because they're over there.

—*Toni Morrison*

A common misperception regarding those in poverty is that they are not willing to take risks and do the work necessary to improve themselves. Extend this commonplace to those residing in urban ghettos, along with their advocates, and the thinking goes something like this: “They just want to keep poor people poor by refusing to welcome infusions of capital that would improve the neighborhood. They don't want to do the work needed to develop the neighborhood. They're against development.” The same thinking applies to misguided criticisms of efforts to provide needed material resources for prison education. Here, the criticism often goes as follows: “Providing prisoners with more educational services to improve themselves flies in the face of the true purpose of incarceration—which is punishment, not rehabilitation. Prisoners should not be rewarded with a free education when they've shown themselves not to be responsible enough to not end up in prison in the first place.”

These critiques of anti-gentrification efforts and prison education could not be further from the truth.

The driving force behind such calls as the fight against gentrification and the support of prison education is the very valid fear that the most vulnerable among us are at risk of not experiencing the benefits that come with economic development and access to formal education. An even starker threat is the very real possibility that people could be altogether removed from the community to

make room for financial investment and educational opportunities for only those deemed worthy enough. Far from being against development, those against gentrification are for development that mutually benefits *all* community stakeholders. Far from being against taking personal responsibility for one's own education, those in favor of prison education are against excluding select individuals from access to formal education and are for creating conditions in which *all* are afforded the opportunity to take personal initiative in directing their own learning in a formal setting no matter their social standing. The threat of removal from flourishing communities of learning, whether it be through removal from homes or the warehousing of "criminal" bodies in the prison-industrial complex, has consequences for literacy and the maintenance of a critically literate citizenship. Along with the threat of removal comes the threat of devaluing the literacy practices of those targeted for removal. Even more to the point: removing physical bodies from spheres of public deliberation is akin to removing the possibility of using literacy to struggle justly over matters of equality and fundamental human rights.

Developing our capacities to use literacy to work for social justice can be supported by promoting versions of economic development and prison education that do more than merely give recognition to subjugated identities and knowledges. Developing virtually any literacy practice that works for social justice also requires building resources for literacy that advance both cultural inclusion *and* material support for activist causes. There are indeed those who remain under threat of removal from society's concerns, whose very identities and cultural contributions are under attack from an economic system that views them as disposable. Coming to grips with such a violent politics requires the use of critical terms that lay bare the politics of globalization.

Social theorist Arjun Appadurai proposes the term "econocide" to illustrate the "new modes of violence playing out across the world in the wake of massive inequalities and the rapidity of change produced by world capitalism" (Dutton, "Indian" 4). Not just an effort to assure that whole sections of the global population undergo death by economic means, econocide "is a worldwide tendency...to arrange the disappearance of the losers in the great drama of globalization" (Appadurai 41). Indeed, critical literacy practices can play a central role in articulating econocide's full intent by narrating the folly of accepting this "inevitable" erasure of entire populations.

This essay draws from our respective engagement with community literacy: work in a local urban neighborhood and work in a prison. Each of us provides accounts of how *econocide situates "economic others" outside the sphere of obligation, putting these individuals on their own to "prove themselves," while at the same time ensuring they do not have the necessary resources to make such "proof" possible.* As a social practice, econocide functions to absolve perpetrators of any responsibility in enacting the crime. As a literacy practice, econocide provides rhetorical tools for those in power to articulate a kind of "blame game" that places the primary burden on the victims themselves in trying to conform to dominant modes of speaking, writing, and making one's way in the world. At the same time, the victims are denied access to literacy practices that could "prove" successful fluency in this literacy game. In this sense, the literacy game is rigged from the outset.

Unfortunately, changing a rigged game is usually not a straightforward matter. In this case, the sheer force of capitalist economies to direct free-market initiatives in tandem with the neoliberal

project presents obvious challenges to grassroots organizing, as evidenced by econocide's intentional framing of "development" and "education" as a game resulting in winners and losers. From the vantage point of Composition Studies, determining how literacy education might be used to build partnerships with local communities clearly slotted for the losing side is especially difficult. Under conditions of econocide, what political work is possible when we, in Composition Studies, genuinely commit to, and act upon, the possibility of building solidarity with a community targeted for removal? What lessons might be gained through an examination of community literacy projects being used to fight back against econocide when the literacy game is so obviously rigged against our community partners?

In addressing these questions, this essay begins with Wilkey's account of direct challenges to econocide through literacy practices confronting gentrification in a local urban neighborhood, involving students and community members alike in exposing the rhetoric of "economic mix" as a tool for blaming the poor for their own plight. Wilkey gives an overview of how his students participated in a community literacy project that rhetorically takes sides, and builds solidarity, with individuals targeted for removal. Wilkey's reflection here provides an instance in which a community literacy project is used to call public attention to the injustices caused by econocide's oppressive literacy game. However, making visible the devastating effects of this rigged literacy game in the public's imagination is only one of the essential tactics required to successfully challenge econocide's grip on literacy more generally; a more complete appreciation of the literacy practices that remain under siege by the threat of econocide can shed light on what is further needed to counter this rigged literacy game successfully in practice. To this end, we turn to Cleary's reflection on his prison work, in which he documents how the "rhetoric of personal responsibility" associated with reforming prisoners is countered through the literacy work he facilitates with a local prison writing group. In doing so, Cleary theorizes how those targeted by econocide can use literacy to overcome overwhelming obstacles. Here, Cleary turns to James Paul Gee's work in literacy studies, which provides key concepts that are particularly germane to addressing the effects of econocide through political literacy education in a prison setting. Rather than tying literacy only to the ability to read and write, Gee approaches literacy as "*the mastery of or fluent control over*" discourses that rule our lives (9, emphasis in original). The literacy instruction in which Cleary engages provides an example of how community literacy practitioners might directly help to facilitate processes in which "economic others" gain fluency in successfully navigating econocide's entrenched terrain. Taken together, Wilkey's and Cleary's reflections operate as rhetorical challenges to "economic mix" and "prisoner reform," showing glimpses of the kind of game-changing required to delegitimize econocide in the public consciousness.

WILKEY'S NARRATIVE OF A COMMUNITY LITERACY PROJECT CONFRONTING ECONOCIDE IN A GENTRIFYING NEIGHBORHOOD

In many respects, Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine (OTR) neighborhood is typical of many urban

centers undergoing gentrification. However, the sheer breadth and rapidity of this gentrifying process is overwhelming. After decades of being marked “within the cultural imagination of the entire Cincinnati region” as “symbolic of all the negative images and things that are supposedly wrong with the city: crime, blight, dirtiness, general poverty, etc.” (Dreese et al. 154), OTR is now commonly perceived as a neighborhood that “has been transformed into one of Cincinnati’s most vibrant sectors” (Sheridan). It goes without saying, however, that poverty still exists in OTR and that the “extremes of gentrification and homelessness” have transformed a significant part of the neighborhood into the census tract with the highest level of income inequality in the nation (Dutton, *Do You*). Significantly, economic development is being sponsored and enacted by a private “non-profit” corporation, named the Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation (3CDC), which operates to expedite the gentrifying process by financing and land-banking entire swaths of empty and lived-in buildings in order to make the neighborhood more welcoming to higher-income residents. A stated goal of 3CDC’s mission is “to create diverse, mixed-income neighborhoods supported by local business” (“Who We Are”). As a corporate-backed 501(c)3 with a board of directors made up nearly entirely of Cincinnati Fortune 500 corporate executives (see “Board of Directors”), 3CDC operates as the city of Cincinnati’s “preferred developer.” As Thomas Murphy, a senior resident fellow at the Urban Land Institute, an international land-use and real-estate industry organization, has put it, “What 3CDC is doing in the Over-the-Rhine area is nothing short of remarkable...the area was as depressed as any in the country. Now it is one of the best in America. The quality of development 3CDC is doing and the scale [are] pretty remarkable. 3CDC is not only physically changing the neighborhood but culturally as well and financing it creatively using public/private financing driven by the private sector” (qtd. in Sheridan).

But of course the corporate game plan being played out in Cincinnati follows the rules of a game that remains rigged, as gentrifying processes generate high stakes in favor of upper-income people at the expense of low-income residents. As a matter of econocide, descriptors such as “income mix” and “mixed-income development” are promoted as covers for “how one city used, and continues to use, legislation and administration of public policy for economic development, housing, and privatized management of public assets to dispose of people, mostly poor and perceived as undesirable” (Skirtz 4). A major element of this form of gentrification involves the ability of city government to dispense with any significant obligations that assure that the economically disenfranchised are provided with genuine opportunities for collective input into matters of public concern. “Privileging private authority over public decision making,” writes Alice Skirtz in *Econocide: Elimination of the Urban Poor*, “allows econocide to unfold and actualizes notions of deconcentration of economic others to facilitate their removal” (6).

The relative lack of genuine deliberative, public spaces in OTR means that economic others and their allies have had to work to create their own opportunities for voicing concerns, while contending with the devastating effects of econocide. Within this context, appreciating how community literacy initiatives seek to establish a public forum that might effectively change the literacy game requires a shift in our conventional conceptions of how best to model our community partnerships. As a community literacy practitioner introducing my students to struggles experienced by economic

others on the ground in OTR, I've had to come to terms with what constitutes productive, ethical relations between students and community members when the common goal of community research as limited to conventional standards of academic inquiry will not suffice. Nancy Welch and others have made convincing cases for why community literacy scholarship has by and large resisted framing partnerships with the community as efforts to take strong political positions publicly advocating or lobbying for distinct oppositional agendas and goals (see Parks; Welch; Wilkey). A basic concern for many community literacy practitioners may be the risk that such a community literacy project might impose political agendas onto the community at the expense of "academic inquiry" or that students may be made to feel that their participation in an "overly-politicized" community literacy project imposes on their own political beliefs. However, if we understand that assessing community work strictly from some supposed "academic perspective" is largely an effort to use a privileged discourse, "then it is difficult to imagine how that same discourse might address the concerns of a socially disenfranchised group, other than to say that one is providing critical insights from a position of privilege entirely divorced from the discursive exchanges and material conditions giving rise to the social injustices in the first place" (Wilkey 43).

Creating an opening for an alternative conception of the ethics of partnerships involving students and community members is one way to counter charges that a politically-charged community literacy project risks colonizing students and community members alike. Just as important, a convincing account of the value of such partnerships on the ground can provide some important



Fig. 1. Jim Tarbell mural.

critical insights necessary for effectively using literacy education to challenge economic others. One particular community literacy project that I helped facilitate in OTR offers a telling example of how students and community partners might usefully come together to voice concerns regarding gentrification in

progress. Significantly, my account of this project below helps to shed light on how we in Composition Studies might work to change the literacy game through our community partnerships.

In the fall semester of 2009, I worked on a community literacy "Agit-Prop" project that brought together students from the Miami University Center for Community Engagement in Over-the-Rhine, Northern Kentucky University students in my Writing for Social Change course, and students from Chatfield College, a two-year college located in OTR. Our project was in response to a then-recently-created four-story-high mural on the side of a building depicting a well-known resident and politician in Cincinnati, Jim Tarbell, who had been a decades-long leading advocate of "revitalizing"

OTR. In discussing OTR back in 2001 before gentrification intensified in the neighborhood, an award-winning documentary, *Visions of Vine Street*, noted that “Where many can see only abandoned buildings here [OTR], Tarbell sees opportunity” and envisions an OTR where there is “a better mix of people.” Indeed, Tarbell is often credited as a visionary who saw OTR as ripe for gentrification as early as forty years ago (see “Full Biography”).



Fig. 2. Jim Tarbell mural flyer/hand-bill.

The creation of the mural was sponsored by a local non-profit dedicated to building public art projects with input from the community. However, after learning that the decision to place this mural of Jim Tarbell at a prominent entry point into OTR occurred without any actual meaningful community input, the students set out to inquire into what community residents thought of this towering four-story likeness of an older white man holding up a top hat (see Figure 1). In consultation with the community, the students decided to reproduce a modified picture of the mural on flyers and hand-bills, adding a bubble for community residents to write in what they would imagine the figure of the older white man saying (see Figure 2). Students went out into the neighborhood and met with community residents, all the while learning what their feelings and thoughts were regarding the ongoing gentrification. In doing this engagement work,

Community residents and passers-by were simply asked to consider what Mr. Tarbell’s likeness was saying, and to surmise what the mural means for the future of the neighborhood.... The voices tabulated by the students resulted in a culminating exhibition at InkTank on December 1 [see Figure 3]... . *StreetVibes*, the newspaper of the Cincinnati

Coalition of the Homeless, was a co-sponsor of the project and published several community responses in its edition of December 1– 14, 2009 [see Figure 4]. (“ArtWorks Mural”)¹

In considering the useful knowledge gained through this community inquiry, it was further noted that “[t]he responses were decisive. And while the spectrum from positive to negative was aptly represented, there was also a clear message that most African-Americans felt the mural represents their displacement from Over-the-Rhine” (“ArtWorks Mural”).

This community literacy “Agit-Prop” project represents a much needed alternative approach to community partnerships and a glimpse into what’s needed to challenge econocide on the ground in



Fig. 3. Jim Tarbell mural "agit-prop" exhibition display.

the following key way: Students are positioned as inquiring into a local community while simultaneously participating in direct action designed to educate the public by uncovering an already present oppositional political consciousness identified within the neighborhood. Elsewhere I have written about how there is an oppositional social movement in the neighborhood, the Over-the-Rhine People’s Movement, which has been under threat of being eclipsed from the public’s imagination after forty-plus years of ongoing political

struggle due to the most recent onslaught of gentrification over the past decade (see Wilkey). In contrast to more conventional models of community partnership that discourage oppositional activities on the part of university representatives engaging in community work (see Flower; Deans; see Parks for a critique of these conventional community partnership models), this particular community literacy project helped facilitate a process by which support for an oppositional political cause (in this case, the cause of anti-gentrification) is directly reflected in the actions associated with that project itself. At the same time, the concern that students were being coerced to support a controversial political position through their participation in this project is mitigated by the fact that the students were asked to engage in activities designed to support the Over-the-Rhine People’s Movement by projecting “its stories and concerns into the public realm, which encourages new learning on the part of public audiences” (“What is ‘Agit-Prop?’”). In this sense, as a community literacy practitioner, I held out faith that students would come to appreciate how participating in this project created opportunities for new learning on their own part as well. As an effort to demonstrate the oppositional literacy strategies already held by a community of economic others, this project indicated something that is ultimately needed to combat econocide successfully, namely, the recognition that subjugated knowledges often contain oppositional insights that all of us can learn from.

'Just Another Brick in the Wall'

We don't need no gen-tri-fi-ca-tion

By GREGORY EVANS
Editor

Readers of Over the Rhine and StreetVibes readers have plenty to say about the four-story mural of Jim Tarbell at Vine Street and Central Parkway. More than 100 people have submitted cartoons, "balloons" voicing what they imagine the humanist Tarbell would be saying. Aspects of a non-profit art organization, placed the mural of the former vice mayor at a key entry point to Over the Rhine without soliciting input from the neighborhood. In a joint community engagement project, StreetVibes joined

students from Miami University, Northern Kentucky University and Chadwell College in circulating photos of the mural with cartoon subtitles for residents and readers to fill in.

Most of the comments received so far allude to Tarbell's support for the kind of economic development that equates with gentrification - displacing poor people to make room for wealthier people; his opposition to the Drop Inn Center, and his disdain for the late Buddy Gray, its founder.

Some comments refer to Tarbell's concern, reminiscent of the late "Pearl Jim," an elderly man famous for calling peacocks in downtown Cincinnati. Some of the comments are reproduced here. The college students hope to present all the cartoon subtitles in a public exhibit.

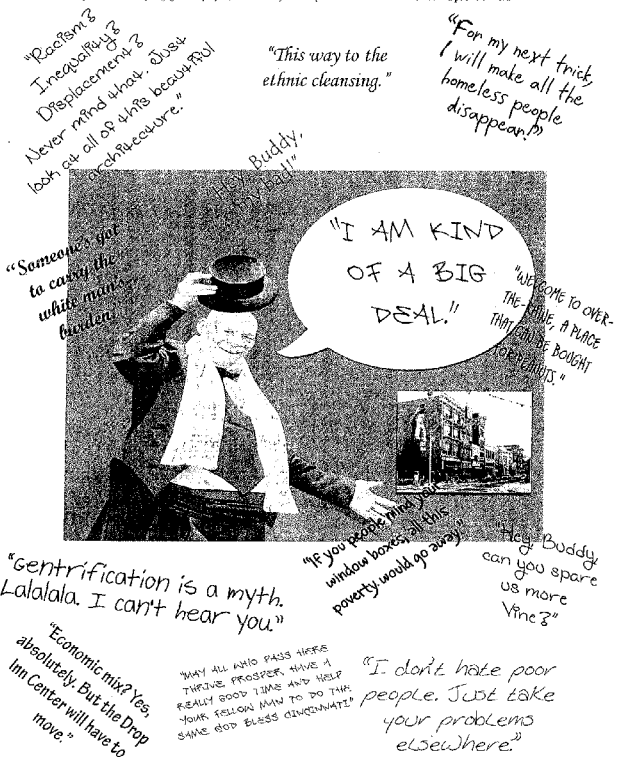


Fig. 4. StreetVibes.

CLEARY'S NARRATIVE OF CHALLENGING ECONOCIDE THROUGH A PRISON WRITING GROUP

Since the fall of 2012, I have been facilitating creative writing workshops for prisoners at Lorain Correctional Institution, a men's prison with a security level between medium and maximum, through a non-profit organization called the Northeast Ohio Community Outreach Project (NEOCOP). In these workshops, inmates have the opportunity to write about whatever they choose, and their writing often addresses issues like the conditions in which they grew up and the conditions to which

they've become enculturated through incarceration.

The following lines come from two different poems by the same incarcerated writer, a bright young man in his thirties. The first example offers a commentary on the conditions in which many prisoners grow up:

Kids posted on blocks
.38s in their socks
throwing rocks
at the penitentiary
been street struck
since elementary

Soda fountains replaced
with traphouses and base
no ballgames taking place
just cops giving chase
people profiled because of race

(Yonkings, "Norman Rockwell" 36)

The second example illustrates the speaker's enculturation into the world of the prison:

Click goes the cuffs
clamped on wrists
Strip down
the naked hokeypokey begins
Turn
Squat
Cough
Left foot
Right foot
Lift your nuts
Get dressed

(Yonkings, "Lockdown [Segregation]" 37)

Taken together, these two sets of conditions—the immediate circumstances in which one is raised and the circumstances into which one has become enculturated—offer a template for how people navigate the world.

James Paul Gee, in "Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction," uses the word "Discourses" with a capital 'D' to refer to "ways of being in the world... the forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes" (6-7). Gee explains that Discourses can be broken down into two types: primary Discourses, which stem from family and peer groups during a young person's primary socialization, and secondary Discourses, which are acquired through apprenticeship and enculturation into groups outside the

family and network of close friends, like businesses, schools, and organizations (6-7). Gee further divides secondary Discourses into two types: dominant Discourses, which bring “money, prestige, status, etc.” to a fluent practitioner “at a particular place and time”; and non-dominant Discourses, which bring “solidarity with a particular social network, but not wider status and social goods in the society at large” (8).

In our prison writing community, the majority of prisoners can be considered individuals who have been unsuccessful in demonstrating fluency in a dominant secondary Discourse. While they may have rich, nurturing primary Discourses and non-dominant secondary Discourses like those of their families and social groups, they have not obtained, in Gee’s terms, access to “enculturation (‘apprenticeship’) into social practices through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered” a secondary Discourse that can bring them social goods and status (7), which help to counteract the effects of econocide. Prison literacy programs offer avenues for helping incarcerated people apprentice into dominant secondary Discourses that can help them avoid reoffending, benefitting both society and the convicted.

In his landmark treatise *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault lays out “Seven Universal Maxims of the Good Penitential Condition” that have been at the heart of prison reform movements since the seventeenth century. The fifth maxim states, “The education of the prisoner is for the authorities both an indispensable precaution in the interests of society and an obligation to the prisoner” (269-71). In a review of studies on the effects of prisoner education, Gerald G. Gaes reports that inmates’ rates of recidivism can be reduced by as much as 46.3% through participation in a postsecondary education program (3), which benefits both the prisoner and society. However, according to a report from the Institute for Higher Education Policy, “In the mid-1990s, changing attitudes and policies toward crime led to the elimination of Pell Grant eligibility for prisoners through a provision in the Violent Crime Control Act of 1994,” a policy change achieved through “a hostile, anti-education, anti-inmate ethos in Congress and society at large” (Gorgol and Sponsler 6). Even Bill Clinton, it seems, understood that prison education programs weren’t politically expedient.

According to Shelby M. Palmer, “Despite research linking education to reduced recidivism, postsecondary prison programs have often been attacked by *tough-on-crime* political posturing and public resentment leading to drastic cuts in state and federal funding” (163-4, emphasis in original). Conservative political discourse over the past two decades has cast prisoners as economic others. Skirtz, for example, explains how Newt Gingrich’s *Contract with America* and the Taking Back our Streets Act of 1995 fostered attitudes and legislation aimed at othering prisoners, even former prisoners, to the point of disappearance from societal participation and obligation. Gingrich’s rhetoric created “threats from criminals—real, perceived, or symbolic—[that] added another group to the collectivity of economic others, those returning from prison, who were routinely deemed unemployable and often denied housing, regardless of the severity of their crimes and/or their having completed their sentences” (Skirtz 14).

While there is a rich variety of literacy practices associated with prisons (sacred-text hermeneutics; letter writing; “kites” or other written requests for assistance; and the composition

of memoirs, poetry, and songs), the ability for inmates to become enculturated into discourses, like academic discourse, that would allow them to question the structural conditions surrounding their own incarceration, while also reflecting upon their own culpability, has been curtailed. Moreover, when prisoners do receive literacy education, such instruction typically confines “prisoners’ reading and writing activities, practices, and material artifacts within a model of literacy that operates only within the parameters of education departments and prison schools, fixed on rates of illiteracy and levels of assessment” (Wilson 70). This purportedly apolitical treatment of literacy actually does a great deal of political work, shifting the blame for incarceration completely onto the prisoners themselves. It assumes that the incarcerated either lack the literacy skills valued by the institution and society, or that they possess these skills and have purposely chosen not to use them, ignoring any possible mitigating structural factors involved in a person’s incarceration in favor of a “rhetoric of personal responsibility.” Given this context, a new, overtly political model of literacy education is needed to counteract the effects of econocide on incarcerated people.

Creative compositions such as the ones written by the men in our workshops provide me and James J. Walsh, my fellow workshop facilitator and a graduate student in English literature at Cleveland State University, several opportunities to discuss prisoners’ existing multiple literacies as well as the Discourses in which they will need to demonstrate mastery in order to avoid reoffending after their release. For example, in the excerpt from the first poem above, the mention of “no ballgames taking place” allows for a group discussion about the possible structural factors that can cause the cancelation of youth sports in the inner city (like the lack of funding, lack of adequate facilities, and even the lack of adult male role models serving as coaches and officials) and what sorts of life skills youth sports can offer to children growing up in neighborhoods with the economic means to support them. Such life skills could include the value of teamwork, the discipline of adhering to a set schedule, and the ability to accept defeat gracefully. The writer’s lines reference “throwing rocks,” a play on risking arrest through dangerous adolescent behavior and also a reference to selling crack cocaine, and offer stark imagery explaining how drug houses have replaced family-oriented businesses as hubs of urban activity. These excerpts underscore economic conditions that place the speaker of this poem at a severe disadvantage in terms of securing an apprenticeship into a secondary Discourse that can make him fluent in the types of “*saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations*” (Gee 6, emphasis in original) that will give him access to money and status.

In the excerpt from the second poem above, the writer describes an entry into a particular non-dominant secondary Discourse, that of solitary confinement, knowledge of which will only serve to create conflict upon attempts at fluency into dominant secondary Discourses that will help him avoid reoffending upon his release. Gee notes that “when such conflict or tension exists, it can deter acquisition of one or the other or both of the conflicting Discourses” (8). While fluency in, or even apprenticeship into, prison Discourses can inhibit prisoners’ abilities to master dominant secondary Discourses, discussions like the ones in our workshop can begin to help inmates develop metaknowledge regarding their primary Discourses and their non-dominant secondary Discourses. More importantly, incarcerated people can use this metaknowledge to understand how the Discourses they’ve already mastered can help them master the dominant Discourses that will help them “pass”

as people who aren't economic others, people who no longer need to be placed outside the sphere of obligation.

I say these individuals need to “pass” because, as Gee argues, “it is difficult to compete with the mastery of those admitted early to the game when one has entered it as late as high school or college” (13); one can only imagine trying to prove fluency in a dominant Discourse after incarceration as an adult. So, since true fluency in dominant secondary Discourses requires sustained periods of immersion into a Discourse’s cultural milieu and apprenticeship with its masters, prisoners will need to rely upon one of their non-dominant Discourses, like the Discourse of prison life, to “mushfake” their way into passing as non-others. As Nancy Mack explains, “‘Mushfake’ means to make do with something less when the real thing is not available. So when prison inmates make hats from underwear to protect their hair from lice, the hats are mushfake” (161). The men in my writing groups are very familiar with mushfake. Mushfake lighters and tattoo guns are popular contraband, and one of the writers in our workshop last year made realistic-looking mushfake model motorcycles complete with break cables made from ear-bud wires.

Mushfake constitutes a large part of many inmates’ literacies. Exposing inmates to creative forms of expression like poetry, teaching them about writing such forms, and holding discussions about inmates’ writings can be liberating, offering them a chance to develop metaknowledge to analyze their own literacies in light of dominant literacies. Gee states, “Classroom instruction (in language, composition, study skills, writing, critical thinking, content-based literacy, or whatever) can lead to metaknowledge, to seeing how the Discourses you have already got relate to those you are attempting to acquire, and how the ones you are trying to acquire relate to self and society” (12-13). While mastery of dominant Discourses cannot be taught or learned in a classroom, literacy educators can help inmates develop “Mushfake Discourse,” “partial acquisition coupled with meta-knowledge and strategies to ‘make do’” (Gee 13). Whereas traditional institutional literacy education reflects econocide’s tendency to marginalize inmates as others by categorizing them as deficient for not meeting institutional expectations for reading and writing practices or by blaming them for not using their mastery of basic reading and writing skills, political literacies emblematic of composition’s new activism can widen the definition of literacy to “ways of being in the world” and help inmates see how they can use their preexisting literacies to mushfake fluency in dominant Discourses in order to reduce their chances of returning to prison after release.

CONCLUSION

Students joining with community partners to build a project supporting anti-gentrification efforts, coupled with a compositionist working with prisoners to develop literacy practices for mushfaking fluency in a dominant Discourse, provide critical insights into countering econocide, making visible an oppositional politics already located in communities of economic others. Having students participate in a community inquiry as a way of learning the power of oppositional discourse provides an avenue for creating community partnerships that challenge some of the most devastating impacts of econocide. In this case, the activity of community inquiry created space for putting into action an oppositional discourse giving voice to the critical insights of “disposable people,” which

society conventionally associates with conferring little, if any, educative value. And yet, by virtue of being publicized through inclusion in a well-attended art exhibit (see Figure 3) and being published in a well-distributed local newspaper (see Figure 4), the artifacts associated with this community literacy project operate to teach the broader public that the social costs that come with gentrification are truly untenable.

On the other hand, merely calling attention to the injustices of econocide is not enough to change a literacy game that is clearly rigged in favor of those already in power. Those who remain victimized by econocide's effects must still contend with assaults on their literacy. Supporting efforts to mushfake fluency in dominant Discourses is one way that Composition Studies can assist economic others in gaining access to economic power and status while they rely on their own nascent capacity to identify, critique, and ultimately dismantle structures of domination. At the end of the day, it is developing political literacies that un-strip the authority of oppressive discourses while assisting economic others in reclaiming their rightful position within the body politic that holds out the best hope for delegitimizing econocide in the public consciousness.

NOTES

¹ A fuller description of the context and activities entailed in this community literacy mural project can be accessed at “ArtWorks Mural Public Response”: http://arts.miamioh.edu/cce/tarbell_mural.html.

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