

 literacy  
in  
Composition  
Studies

2015  
Volume 3, Number 1

## LITERACY IN COMPOSITION STUDIES

### **Managing Editor**

Brenda Glascott  
*California State University, San Bernardino*

### **Senior Editor**

Tara Lockhart  
*San Francisco State University*

### **Submissions Editor**

Chris Warnick  
*College of Charleston*

### **Editor**

Holly Middleton  
*High Point University*

### **Editor**

Juli Parrish  
*University of Denver*

### **Design Editor**

Justin Lewis  
*University of Nevada, Reno*

## EDITORIAL BOARD

Patricia Bizzell  
*College of the Holy Cross*

Eli Goldblatt  
*Temple University*

Allan Luke  
*Queensland University of Technology*

Jean Ferguson Carr  
*University of Pittsburgh*

Harvey J. Graff  
*Ohio State University*

Thomas P. Miller  
*University of Arizona*

Christiane Donahue  
*Dartmouth College*

Bruce Horner  
*University of Louisville*

Steve Parks  
*Syracuse University*

Doug Eyman  
*George Mason University*

Carmen Kynard  
*John Jay College of Criminal  
Justice/CUNY*

Donna Qualley  
*Western Washington University*

Jenn Fishman  
*Marquette University*

Mariolina Salvatori  
*University of Pittsburgh*

John Scenters-Zapico  
*University of Texas at El Paso*

Brian V. Street  
*King's College, London University*

Kate Vieira  
*University of Wisconsin, Madison*

Cynthia Selfe  
*Ohio State University*

Donna Strickland  
*University of Missouri*

Robert P. Yagelski  
*State University of New York at Albany*

Mary Soliday  
*San Francisco State University*

Jennifer Seibel Trainor  
*San Francisco State University*

Morris Young  
*University of Wisconsin, Madison*

*LICS* is published with financial and administrative support from High Point University and California State University, San Bernardino.

Editorial Assistant: Colleen Etman

Cover design and print layout: Justin Lewis

Logo Design: Richard Parent and Megan Berner, Buffalo Wallow

Publicity Design by Megan Berner, Buffalo Wallow, and Justin Lewis

Website: [www.licsjournal.org](http://www.licsjournal.org)

Email: [licsjournal@gmail.com](mailto:licsjournal@gmail.com)

## LiCS MISSION STATEMENT

*Literacy in Composition Studies* is a refereed open access online journal that sponsors scholarly activity at the nexus of Literacy and Composition Studies. We foreground *literacy* and *composition* as our keywords because they do particular kinds of work. We want to retain Composition's complicated history as well as FYC's institutional location and articulation to secondary education. Through literacy, we denote practices that are both deeply context-bound and always ideological. Literacy and Composition are therefore contested terms that often mark where the struggles to define literate subjects and confer literacy's value are enacted. We are committed to publishing scholarship that explores literacy at its intersection with Composition's history, pedagogies, and interdisciplinary methods of inquiry.

Literacy is a fluid and contextual term. It can name a range of activities from fundamental knowledge about how to decode text to interpretive and communicative acts. Literacies are linked to know-how, to insider knowledge, and literacy is often a metaphor for the ability to navigate systems, cultures, and situations. At its heart, literacy is linked to interpretation—to reading the social environment and engaging and remaking that environment through communication. Orienting a Composition Studies journal around literacy prompts us to investigate the ways that writing is interpretive as well as persuasive; to analyze the connections and disconnections between writing and reading; and to examine the ways in which literacy acts on or constitutes the writer even as the writer seeks to act on or with others.

LiCS seeks submissions that interpret literacy at a time of radical transformation in its contexts and circulation. We are open to a wide range of research that takes up these issues, and we are especially interested in work that:

- provides provisional frameworks for theorizing literacy activities
- analyzes how literacy practices construct student, community, and other identities
- investigates the ways in which social, political, economic, and technological transformations produce, eliminate, or mediate literacy opportunities
- analyzes the processes whereby literacies are valued or legitimated
- examines the literacies sponsored through college writing courses and curricula, including the range of literate activities, practices, and pedagogies that shape and inform, enable and constrain writing
- considers the implications of institutional, state, or national policies on literacy learning and teaching, including the articulation of high schools and higher education
- proposes or creates opportunities for new interactions between Literacy and Composition Studies, especially those drawing on transnational and cross-cultural literacy research

## Special Editors' Introduction to Issue 3.1

There's a saying, sometimes attributed as a French Proverb: "If you don't do politics, politics does you." This seems a straightforward enough idea. Yet as a field, we seem hesitant to acknowledge our necessary and unavoidable role within political structures. Perhaps out of a sense of professionalism, we place a veneer of neutrality around our classrooms and scholarship that constrains our potential as rhetoricians, public writers, and educators. At such moments, we are reminded of Paulo Freire's "Letter to a North American Teacher": "The idea of an identical and neutral role for all teachers could only be accepted by someone who was either naive or very clever. Such a person might affirm the neutrality of education, thinking of school as merely a kind of parenthesis whose essential structure was immune to the influences of social class, of gender, or race" (211). That is, claims of neutrality are either naive of political conditions or a clever way of preserving an unjust status quo. Breaking free of this thinking allows us to ask what our teaching supports and challenges, what our scholarship maintains and combats. With these questions in mind and a recognition of the need to decide and to act, we developed this special issue.

Indeed, the myth of neutrality was exposed through events too numerous to name as we accepted and reviewed essays. The brutal treatment and arrest of Dr. Ersula Ore on Arizona State University's campus reminds us that universities are not safe from persistent racism and state violence. Dr. Ore, an English professor, was accosted, brutalized, and arrested for walking on a street in front of a construction zone. In this case, organizations like NCTE and CCCC joined thousands of supporters around the country in calling for justice for Dr. Ore ("NCTE").

Acknowledging our critical role in history and our inevitable placement within political systems comes with responsibility. Kiese Laymon's brilliant reflection in "My Vassar College ID Makes Everything OK," published on *Gawker*, emphasizes what is at stake. An English Professor at Vassar who describes many racist encounters with police and campus security, Laymon asks us to consider the connection between our roles in academia and the most blatant abuses of our society, naming those abuses directly:

You have a Michigan State Faculty ID, and seven-year old Aiyana Stanley-Jones was killed in a police raid. You have a Wilberforce University Faculty ID and 12-year-old Tamir Rice was shot dead by police for holding a BB gun. I have a Vassar College Faculty ID and NYPD suffocated Shereese Francis while she lay face-down on a mattress. You have a University of Missouri Student ID and Mike Brown's unarmed 18-year-old black body lay dead in the street for four and a half hours. (Laymon)

How do we write and teach about events that cannot be neutral? How do we do justice for the bodies attacked and killed by this state and other states? One thing is for sure—we have to think differently about the place of our scholarship and about the constraints of civility and neutrality. These moves come with tangible risks, as we saw when the University of Illinois rescinded the hiring of Steven Salaita for his unpopular public critiques of Israel's most recent war on Gaza. The administration at the University of Illinois wrote that Salaita's tweets betrayed the "expectation of a university community that values civility as much as scholarship" (Jaschik).

Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and four children playing on a beach in Gaza—all killed as we accepted articles to this special issue—what is our responsibility to them? Their deaths and the systems of oppression tied to them beg us to ask: What good is neutrality when it restrains a clear-eyed view of our social and political conditions? What good is civility when it restrains us from naming political conditions and events that are far from civil? Here it might be worth noting that many great rhetoricians, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Angela Y. Davis, Cesar Chavez, and Harvey Milk, were chastised for being unreasonable in their rhetoric, their actions, and their demands. Today, what might a recognition of material circumstances and a critical view of history draw forth? What might it demand from us as educators and scholars in an age of neoliberalism that encourages us to think that the current social relations are inevitable and normal? How do we do our part to build a society that is peaceful because, as a condition, we have made it just?

Of course, in taking this stance, we are aware of how it might sound—how it could be cartooned into an appeal for ideologically driven scholarship and pedagogy. We would argue, however, that the opposite is the case. To be aware of and write from a responsibility to material conditions and a critical view of history is to maintain the sort of rigor with the facts, research, and argumentative precision that intellectual work requires. To move beyond the veneer of neutrality is to take on a new set of responsibilities as scholars and educators, not a license to take uninformed positions, as critics might have it. Arguing against conventional wisdom is always more intellectually rigorous than maintaining an unjust status quo.

The articles in this collection are evidence of an important combination—the need for rigorous research that is also direct in its political impact, a scholarship that can produce both an informed and blunt response to power. The key challenge will be to understand how we move between these complex demands in a way that not only speaks to the current moment but also prepares our students to be equally responsible and informed actors in their own civic lives.

To this end, we have published essays that represent elements of this blend among an understanding of the current political moment, various forms of social action, and their connections to literacy and composition—recognizing that no one essay, research project, or community program could capture it all. Indeed, one lesson learned from piecing together this collection was that we could imagine *collaboration* and *collectivity* as the hallmarks of any future work. Many methods, strategies, and frameworks may be welcomed. In this way, we present this special issue not with the hope of neutrality but rather with the intention of multiple examples of scholars and citizens who are interrogating positions, decisions, and knowledges in complex and contingent ways.

In this issue, Carmen Kynard and others make clear that we cannot be neutral, or silent, in the face of injustice. Specifically, Kynard shows how racism, while systemic, is also enacted by communities and individuals who should know better, as she names microaggressions and the blatant racism of students and faculty at several institutions. We believe such naming is not just scholarly research; it is a political act—just as it is also political not to mention material circumstances and historical oppressions. She challenges readers to work for racial justice on campus and in departments, even when it is uncomfortable, when it is risky, or when doing so may break academic norms of civility and neutrality.

In this collection, scholars, teachers, and workers name their material conditions and social locations and describe attempts to work on the side of social justice. In doing so, we also made a point of choosing essays that deploy a variety of research and argumentative strategies and that include a variety of voices. For instance, Tamera Marko, Mario Ernesto Osorio, Eric Sepenoski, and Ryan Catalani question how students, teachers, and campus maintenance workers can interact in productive ways when the political landscape of education affords students the chance to receive an “A” for taking a course and doing writing that puts immigrant workers at risk of being fired. They describe the challenges they have faced throughout the past five years in developing a translingual course at Emerson College that is for both maintenance workers and undergraduate students, arguing that the “political economy of translingual rhetorical mobility” disadvantages the maintenance workers in problematic ways and often renders their experiences and stories invisible.

Locating themes in contemporary social struggles, Shon Meckfessel’s reflections on the Occupy Movement in relation to composition studies and Vani Kannan, Joe Schike, and Sue Doe’s connection of campus labor struggles to theater build upon prior discussions and offer avenues for “new” ways of thinking and of acting politically through our roles as scholars, teachers, and citizens. Meckfessel asks what a composition pedagogy might do to hold space in the face of social antagonism, as the Occupy Movement did. Kannan, Schike, and Doe describe creative ways to stay vigilant within the shifting terrain of campus labor organizing. Also considering campus-based labor organizing, Rachel Riedner describes the need for a more critical look at the laboring bodies at universities in an effort to make visible university employment structures that are both gendered and racialized.

With this issue, we know that we cannot be “new” without knowing our history—the very possibility of political transformation necessitates that we see and understand the current moment as a series of historical choices made by people. Deborah Mutnick and Candace Epps-Robertson provide articles that draw from histories of racism and civil rights, helping us to re-articulate our pedagogy today. Mutnick describes a pedagogy that allows students to identify shifting rhetorics of racism, reflecting on student work in the age of “colorblindness.” Epps-Robertson, looking at the Prince Edward County Free School, describes a moment in education during the Civil Rights era that challenged white constructions of citizenship.

As we look to the past, we also need to take seriously how the tools for political transformation today are evolving, ensuring that scholars, students, and those of us in social movements are ready to work with (or struggle against) the power of such new tools. Caroline Dadas and Justin Jory analyze the pepper spraying of peaceful protesters at UC Davis, showing how people remediated semiotic representations of this event—through twitter postings, memes, videos— in order to disrupt and even challenge a status quo in digital or physical spaces. Analyzing social media activism as both possibility and constraint, Rachael Shapiro challenges a digital literacy myth that too often promotes Western social media technologies as the historical actors in global social movements, instead of acknowledging the ongoing significance of people in the streets. Similarly, Phyllis Ryder provides an example, through considering the representation of Malala Yousafzai’s work, of what it might mean to successfully navigate this new digital media environment to circulate alternative viewpoints. She challenges progressive critiques, which rightly call out the Western media for co-opting Yousafzai’s

narrative but do not recognize how Yousafzai subverts and resists those Western representations.

Other contributions examine roles of civility, critical pedagogy, and competition in composition. John Pell and William Duffy highlight how Freire's work might be re-envisioned given current social tensions, creating classrooms that offer students the ability to name the differences in material conditions that are often a primary cause for social disagreement. Stacey Waite demonstrates how the classroom itself might model an alternative sense of competition to what marks our current "market economy." Waite draws from her experience coaching a high school slam poetry team and explores "the contradictory nature of competition," which provides a means to "challenge the status quo rather than reinscribe it" with the possibilities of "generate[ing] rhetorical listening and literacy communities."

This issue also considers changing contexts and conceptions of literacy. Over the past fifty years, literacy has moved from denoting basic reading/writing skills to including written and spoken dialects to, ultimately, expanding as a framework to understand knowledge in communities. We would argue that this moment demands that literacy in composition studies must include political literacy—an attention to systems of power that informs the production and reception of texts, a deep consideration of the *world* out of which the *word* is brought forth. Christopher Wilkey and Daniel J. Cleary examine literacy in a political and economic context, providing examples of "rigged" literacy games that sustain gentrification and the prison industrial complex. They examine the connection of literacy to systems that involve the removal of people from societies and communities. Through Gabriela Rios' participation with farm workers, she describes a community literacy bounded less by disciplinarity and more by grassroots demands. Together, these articles are examples of a more politically informed and perceptive literacy education.

It seems appropriate to end with an acknowledgement of the breadth of this special issue. With complex social circumstances and histories to consider, with a variety of practices and strategies in classrooms and communities, and with the need both to name specific circumstances and also to embed them in theories and analyses that connect beyond local conditions, we felt compelled to accept a wide range of essays. With such diverse perspectives and contexts, we cannot claim to define some singular "new" form of activist practice. What we offer instead is a collection that includes visions for contemporary and emerging scholarship and pedagogy for a more politically conscious composition and literacy.

*Ben Kuebrich - Syracuse University*

*Jessica Pauszek - Syracuse University*

*Steve Parks - Syracuse University*

## WORKS CITED

- Freire, Paulo. "Letter to North American Teachers." *Freire for the Classroom: A Sourcebook for Liberatory Teaching*. Ed. Ira Shor. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1987. Print.
- Jaschik, Scott. "U. of Illinois Faculty Panel Issues Mixed Report on Aborted Hiring of Steven Salaita @insidehighered." *Inside Higher Ed*, 2 Jan. 2015. Web. 30 Jan. 2015.
- Laymon, Kiese. "My Vassar College Faculty ID Makes Everything OK." *Gawker*, 29 Nov. 2014. Web. 30 Jan. 2015.
- Levine, Joseph. "Did Salaita Cross the Line of 'Civility'?" *The New York Times*, 14 Dec. 2014. Web. 30 Jan. 2015.
- "NCTE & CCCC Speak Out Against Professor's Treatment by ASU Police." *NCTE Comprehensive News*, N.p., 4 July 2014. Web. 30 Jan. 2015.

## CONTENTS

### ARTICLES

---

- 1 Teaching While Black: Witnessing Disciplinary Whiteness, Racial Violence, and Race-Management  
*Carmen Kynard—John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY*
- 21 Proyecto Carrito—When the Student Receives an 'A' and the Worker Gets Fired: Disrupting the Unequal Political Economy of Translingual Rhetorical Mobility  
*Tamera Marko—Emerson College*  
*Mario Ernesto Osorio—Emerson College*  
*Eric Sepenoski—Emerson College*  
*Ryan Catalani—Emerson College*
- 44 (Un)Rigging the Literacy Game: Political Literacies that Challenge Econocide  
*Christopher Wilkey—Northern Kentucky University*  
*Daniel J. Cleary—Lorain County Community College*
- 60 Cultivating Land-Based Literacies and Rhetorics  
*Gabriela Rios—University of Central Florida*
- 71 The Rhetorics of Race and Racism: Teaching Writing in an Age of Colorblindness  
*Deborah Mutnick—Long Island University*
- 82 "Teaching Must Be Our Demonstration!": Activism in the Prince Edward County Free School Association, 1963-1964  
*Candace Epps-Robertson—Michigan State University*
- 95 Freire in the Agora: Critical Pedagogy and Civil Discourse  
*John Pell—Whitworth University*  
*William Duffy—University of Memphis*
- 108 Put Me in, Coach: The Political Promise of Competitive Composing  
*Stacey Waite—University of Nebraska*
- 122 Where are the Women? Rhetoric of Gendered Labor in University Communities  
*Rachel Riedner—George Washington University*

- 131 Performing Horizontal Activism: Expanding Academic Labor Advocacy  
Throughout and Beyond a Three-Step Process  
*Vani Kannan—Syracuse University*  
*Joe Schicke—Tulsa Community College*  
*Sue Doe—Colorado State University*
- 143 Toward an Economy of Activist Literacies in Composition Studies: Possibilities  
for Political Disruption  
*Caroline Dadas—Montclair State University*  
*Justin Jory—Salt Lake City Community College*
- 156 Rhetorics of Hope: Complicating Western Narratives of a 'Social Media  
Revolution'  
*Rachael Shapiro—Syracuse University*
- 175 Beyond Critique: Global Activism and the Case of Malala Yousafzai  
*Phyllis Mentzell Ryder—George Washington University*
- 188 Making Space, not Demands: Literacies of Autonomy and Dissensus  
*Shon Meckfessel—University of Washington*

# Teaching While Black: Witnessing and Countering Disciplinary Whiteness, Racial Violence, and University Race-Management

Carmen Kynard John Jay College of Criminal Justice,  
CUNY

## KEYWORDS

anti-racist pedagogy, disciplinary racism, institutional racism, racial realism, whiteness

Imagine a department where there is only one black professor, a common occurrence across universities and colleges today. She is the first black professor in the history of the department there and certainly the first to be tenured. After many years, she finally sees a graduate student complete her dissertation, a young black woman who is also amongst the first black females to graduate with a doctorate from this program. And while there are plenty of ancestors and kinfolk across states, countries, and even continents celebrating this achievement, some of the white faculty are not as ecstatic. In fact, a few white junior professors, self-proclaimed feminists who teach first year writing, both stunningly under-achieving in their fields, begin to tell people that the professor wrote the dissertation for this black female graduate student, with the full support of staff/administration in spreading this Untruth. In the parlay of black youth culture, yes, we can call that: *haters gon hate*. While fully acknowledging all *that hateration*, let's also dig deeper.

It would seem that any researcher or scholar in the academy would know that you cannot possibly present at conferences, give keynote addresses, publish your own articles, review other articles for peer-reviewed journals, work on your own book manuscripts, review other people's manuscripts and books in print, work on grant-funded projects, and then also *write someone else's dissertation for them*. It seems safe to say that it is a huge task to even make time to read drafts of advisees' dissertations. This event is just one of many that show how white faculty and staff can be deeply invested in the illogic of their racism. This story, along with the many other stories that I will tell here, will serve not as micro-instances of campus racism but as macro-pictures of political life in American universities. I intend for these stories to offer a context for the ways in which we must understand and rupture whiteness, racial violence, and the institutional racism of our disciplinary constructs in composition-rhetoric as central to the political work we must do.

## TANGLED WEBS: RACIST PROCESSES SEEN, HEARD, AND FELT

Like any good theorist of race and racism in the academy today, I dutifully acknowledge that race is socially constructed and, therefore, a product of social relations and not biological/genetic difference. This does not mean, however, that I promote the general post-modernist zeitgeist and angst that would suggest that race is illusory or peripheral to social organization, past or present, or that our identities are so multiple and complex that race can evaporate as a social category (Roediger). The institutional racism in which students and faculty must daily think and act is always very real and moving according to the specificity of two directions: the local situation and the national tenor of the moment.

Zeus Leonardo's work particularly challenges much of our current research and discourse, especially when theorized solely from the location of white privilege, which, as Leonardo argues, only offers a passive description of white racial domination as if racial domination happens without active agents, making whiteness *a state of being dominant* rather than a calculated and calculating series of racist *processes*. Leonardo's focus on active agents is a compelling mode of analysis that I believe most scholars of color are discouraged from pursuing. While much of our work that has chronicled the multiple literate lives of students of color has been embraced, it is not clear that the work has actually *been mobilized* to change classrooms for students of color in schools and colleges. It is much safer for us to unfurl the specialized, disciplinary methodologies and vocabularies in which we have been trained rather than turn our analytical gaze onto our institutions and its actors that have maintained calculatingly repressive environments, policies, and climates for students and faculty of color. This is a kind of intellectual activist-work that is quite distinct from the organizational work that we do at bourgeois professional conferences and the scholarship that we most often pursue.

If we truly understand ourselves as social actors and not lone individuals, then we can move past a bourgeois liberal orthodoxy that would imagine the professors, staff, and administrators of my opening narrative as merely individuals in one department at one college and, instead, begin to see and name an entire constellation of actors and processes. There are tangled webs of authorizing, credentialing, and sanctioning that have gotten these very actors to the university positions that they occupy and that have created the kinds of academic departments and disciplines in which we do our work. In fact, my opening narrative is not particularly spectacular but highlights just another day on the job as I can tell countless stories just like it. It is what bodies of color must negotiate in white university spaces, even when those university spaces represent student populations that are majority of color (the only kind of university where I have ever worked). I have not worked at any single institution, to date, where I have found as many as even three other colleagues who notice, much less speak out, against these kinds of everyday racist microaggressions that I have described despite everyone's seeming incessant discussion of critical theories from postcolonialism/decolonization to intersectionality. The theories can become merely the stage for an academic performance, not a way of engaging the world and oppression in it.

The story gets even more complicated with these actors in my opening narrative. The web

of connections is, indeed, quite complicated. We have to begin to ask, for instance: what does knowledge in this field look like and do when overwhelmingly white editors have published the work of white scholars about students of color, and when those very same white scholars would so casually and calculatingly defame the only black female professor and graduate on their campus? What might it mean that our publications about students of color emanate from racist roots and what does it mean when a publishing apparatus affirms that? From where I stand, I see a field whose central knowledge-making industry—both its journals and the processes of selecting its editors---reproduces racist logics. The very theoretical paradigms in which we work often operate from a space that requires the displacement and denigration of black women. While I understand how and why so many of my colleagues have the privilege of ignoring these “slippages,” many of us do not have the luxury of overlooking such violence because we are its targets. In more pessimistic terms, many of us unknowingly contribute to a kind of “race-management science” if we accept academia’s (our home institutions and our field) embrace of our scholarship on race but do not speak or write against the ways our institutions actively reproduce inequality.

Racism, institutional and structural, is not about some kind of general and generic racially divided world somewhere out there over the rainbow. There is never any moment when racism is subtle or exists as some kind of fine mist that is out there but that I cannot fully see on campus. We need to stop talking about racism and institutions this way in our writing and to our students. Oppression could never work if it were invisible, unarticulated, or unfelt by those it targets. Bonilla-Silva’s work on today’s college undergraduate students’ unwavering reproduction of color-blind racism seems everywhere replicated in our field. A misplaced faith in the progress of the field, shifting demographics at our colleges, or a naturally-occurring expiration of racism have left us inert and unconscious of our own race-reproducing tendencies.

## DEEP HISTORIES AND THE COMPLICATEDNESS OF EVERYDAY LIFE: TEACHING NARRATIVES DEFINED AND REFINED

I am starting with the narrative of a black female graduate student and myself because I am suggesting that it is a critical context in which to understand the space in which black college students and faculty must write and carve out their (literate) being in colleges today. We face a resistance and questioning of our intellect that oftentimes look no different from what Phyllis Wheatley faced when white colonists found it difficult to believe that Wheatley had written her own poetry (Carretta; Doak; Langley). She had to defend her authorship in a Boston court in 1772 to a group that included the then governor of Massachusetts (Gates). It was only when she provided “proof” that they signed the documents verifying her authorship, which was included in her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* published in 1773 (in London, not the U.S.) While the adage that history repeats itself is much too simple to capture social complexities under race and gender in the United States, a historically situated understanding traced back to the first book of poetry published by a black woman, Phillis Wheatley, does offer critical understanding of the continuum of racial barriers.

The late Critical Race Theorist, Derrick Bell, argued that we must see racial progress as cyclical, sometimes regressing in catastrophic ways and, at other times, incrementally moving forward (Bell; Delgado). He called this position Racial Realism and saw it as the most hopeful and pragmatic theoretical lens and praxis to do anti-racist work. His reminder of the importance of Racial Realism seems a portent for today given the brutal murders of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, and Michael Brown, the treatment of Rachel Jeantel's court testimony about Trayvon's murder, the nationwide protests that have animated young activists, the military-state brutality against protesters in Ferguson, Missouri, the discursive somersaults that law enforcement and state institutions continually maneuver to justify racial profiling, and the obvious and constant reminder that to be black in the United States is to be the target of a ruthless racial violence. As central to my own theoretical grounding here, I stick most closely with Sylvia Wynter's "No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues." Written in the midst of the Los Angeles uprising of 1992, Wynter passionately urges us to decode our disciplinary sense-making that is ideologically wedded to the very same violence waged against Rodney King and South Central Los Angeles. I propose to take up Wynter's charge here: 1) that, we begin to *notice* the violence in the classrooms and research that we sustain, and; 2) that, we question the disciplinary apparatus that makes it possible that racially subordinated students of color will experience racial violence at the site where they are supposed to be democratically educated. I'm talking about the kind of social and political processes that we need in order to prevent racist logics as viable membership in this community that we call composition-rhetoric and I am calling these racist logics of the same order of violence as the murders of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Michael Brown (and countless others), the dismissal of Rachel Jeantel, and the brutal targeting of Ersula Ore who was assaulted by campus police. Wynter was always sure that undoing racial violence is an intellectual and epistemological task, but only if we see the work in front of us.

I am offering my own personal experiences and stance of bearing-witness as more than just one individual's observations, but an indication of the levels of systemic racism that we do not address. General discussions about moral and philosophical principles of equity, equality, or diversity are no longer good enough so I take up the tools that Allan Luke privileges: the tools of "story, metaphor, history, and philosophy, leavened with empirical claims," all of which Luke argues are as integral to truth-telling and policymaking as field experiments and meta-analyses (368). I take up these tools in the context of myself as a writer and researcher of black language, education, and literacies and use narratives to offer stories of institutional racism that compositionists—and thereby, our field—have maintained. These narratives offer a place to decode the symbolic violence that is encoded into our disciplinary sense-making and move towards what a theory of Racial Realism might entail for our classrooms and discipline.

The series of stories that I tell here, beginning with my opening narrative, are intentionally crafted as method for organizing, presenting, and politicizing textual arrangement in scholarship (Coulter and Smith; Barone). Narrative as the form of my telling means that I am conscious of the ways that I use stories to understand and present the lives and literacies of students of color where my own cultural role as a black female storyteller enacts its own critical inquiry (L. Richardson, *Fields of Play*, "Getting Personal," "Poetic Representations," "Writing"; Gonick and Hladki).

## TEACHING WHILE BLACK: TEACHING NARRATIVES FURTHER UNFURLED

In a graduate course that I once taught about New Literacies Studies, a white male student objected to Elaine Richardson's claim that women of color, with particular emphases on black women, are hyper-sexualized. In an extensive reading response that he wrote, Richardson's claims are unwarranted since "those women" are simply "promiscuous" and he placed "i.e., slutty" in parentheses after the word promiscuous, presumably because I might not know what such a word with so many letters might mean. He was, of course, not alone in his sentiments. More than a few white men in the class wrote about the ways we African Americans and Latin@s are no longer really challenged by racism; it is our laziness that keeps us behind since we just complain instead of working hard. Latin@s and African Americans are not the only groups who have gotten some heat in my graduate classes.

I have read numerous accounts from white graduate students in my courses about how Asian scholars, especially Morris Young and his book, *Minor Re/Visions: Asian American Literacy Narratives as a Rhetoric of Citizenship*, were simply misinformed when thinking they were offering any pertinent information to anyone who has taught Asian students. In such examples, the numeric over-representation of one racial/ethnic group on a campus is akin to knowing about and respecting them. One might wonder, given this logic, why systems like slave plantations and European colonies, peopled mostly by brown and black bodies, were not oases of freedom, too. This idea that a teacher need not learn about Asian bodies because having their presence in a classroom is enough becomes fraught with problems. Two white female students once even visited my office to inform me, given their history of having taught many African American students, that Elaine Richardson (and myself since I upheld Richardson's position) do not fully understand how much better schools are for black people now and, as such, Richardson and I were distorting the truth. These two women even claimed to relate better (than Richardson and me) to African Americans given their Italian and Irish backgrounds, since they, after all, have experienced the same discrimination as blacks.

I have checked more than a few graduate students who never seemed to get the pronouns accurate on any Asian compositionists we read. It was obvious to me that they were unfamiliar with Asian names, like Min-Zhan Lu, who students often referenced with: "he argues. . ." To deal with this, a group of white MA students decided to proclaim a new, radical gender politics for composition studies: they would exchange he and she pronouns for all authors since gender is, after all, only a social construction. And while that could be an interesting practice, this new radical experimentation was only waged on Asian bodies in the field: white scholars weren't subjected to these new experiments in she and he, his and hers.

I could go on and on like this. My narrative over-indulgence is meant to serve a specific rhetorical purpose here: rather than represent these examples as an exhaustive overview of my specific encounters, I intend to show these examples as casual, everyday occurrences. The responses that I have described are quite typical in the classrooms of black and Latina female professors, especially when your course centers the scholarship of folk of color and issues of race, class, and gender (Alfred;

Sadao and Johnsrud; Thomas and Hollenshead). The prevalence of such racist backlash against faculty of color seems such a steady data stream that we will continue to have a thriving research literature (Stanley et al; Stanley). Many of us are even taught how to account for negative student responses in classes that deal with race, class, and gender when we submit tenure files (Cleveland; Fenelon; Turner). The continuum is quite wide: depending on the school, black and Latina professors can expect calculated protection from offices like Minority or Multicultural Affairs; benign neglect in departments who don't seem to realize that their mentees say such things to faculty and peers of color (only the public expressions of "anger" by black students are noticed); or, at the extreme opposite end, we can expect departments to privilege white students' racist evaluations (Gutiérrez y Muhs, et al). At a National Women's Studies Association conference, for instance, there was significant discussion of one prominent university who validated the evaluations of students who wrote things about black female professors like: "this woman should never be a college professor; she needs to go back to the kitchen where her kind belong." Many of us know that this is what we must confront as the daily-ness of being a black or Latina female faculty member in white institutions. To imagine that changing such sentiments in white college students is an easy task is to ignore centuries of racial oppression and the current race-protest moment in which we live.

In the field of composition-rhetoric, however, we have an altogether different set of issues. For *each and every single* graduate student who I have described, *each and every single* one of them has been hired to teach writing on a university campus. These students are now adjuncts, contract faculty, or tenure track faculty; some work on campuses, especially those who are hired in the tri-state New York area where I teach, where the students are predominantly students of color. That young man who thinks all we blacks and Latin@s are lazy got hired to teach them by a team of compositionists who have been talking and writing up their programs in the field as offering important literacy opportunities for their students. That man who thinks all black and Latina women are "i.e. slutty" is *teaching them right now*. In some cases, some of these students are even proposing to conduct research about students of color. My anecdotes do not compose the story of an isolated, individual campus, but the wider culture of our field. Though I am an obvious member of the campus and program where these graduate students did their degree work, no compositionist or administrator has ever contacted me with questions about these graduate students' capacity for teaching students of color, questions for which I can surely supply a litany of responses. The only phone calls that I ever receive are when a graduate student of color is the job candidate and the one question that marks each conversation is about the collegiality of these young scholars of color: *do they play well with others?* I have seen no evidence, across dozens of programs, of any interest in white candidates' ability to work in classrooms with students of color, only an interest in whether or not young scholars of color will accommodate whiteness. When we talk about institutional racism as it impacts composition-rhetoric classrooms, the field, and college writing programs, we need never feel at a loss for seeing very specific, local iterations.

When discussions about race, culture, and whiteness go down in my graduate classrooms, it is often students of color who challenge white students, rarely other white students though many of them claim to do critical literacy teaching, anti-racist advocacy, and research amongst students

of color. I am reminded of what Bell described when he protested Harvard's refusal to hire a black female law professor: white faculty agreed with him behind closed doors when they visited him in his office but they never spoke up or out in any public setting (Bell, *Faces*). In one particular dissertation proposal seminar, one white female graduate student, someone who is "researching" students of color, spoke at length in a class about how she felt the program was better before the "angry black man" joined; some faculty expressed the same sentiment to me in the hallways, never once problematizing white students' racism. In this kind of culture where we groom our graduate students, it is students of color who will take the heat, much like Bell did, all alone, when he stood against the racism of his peers. Graduate classrooms rarely award those white graduate students who choose to defy majority-white peers and yet, white students' silence is hardly liberatory for them either. More importantly, such silence puts white faculty and graduate students at risk of losing real collegial relationships with and trust from people of color, who will be few and far between on their campuses as it is.

Malea Powell's 2012 Chair's Address seems all the more pertinent here: the call that we *decolonize* our pedagogies, classrooms, and epistemologies. We need to know the deep histories and contemporary realities about racially subjugated groups before we can have something to say about teaching them (Ladson-Billings and Tate; Dixson and Rousseau; Yosso, Parker, Solorzano, and Lynn). The violence of seeing black and Latin@ people as lazy or promiscuous (i.e., slutty), the same as Irish or Italians, or too angry is the context of the classroom that, by my count, hundreds of black and Latin@ college students are sitting in this week, this month, this semester, this year; and, in each case, it was a compositionist who co-signed this placement into the field, position, or program.

If we politically and historically contextualize these narratives and anecdotes that I have provided, we have a very unique intellectual opportunity. I am not suggesting that our students with racist attitudes will not challenge their thinking somewhere down the line, but I am questioning how and why faculty of color experience such classroom events as routine and must do the bulk of the exhausting, debilitating, and non-value-added work of redressing students' racial wrongs, often without any support or acknowledgement from the departments, programs, schools, or fields in which they work. What I am also suggesting here is that we take advantage of an oft-missed opportunity: we can really see how racism works in our field if we ask when, where *and if* such graduate students' racism is ever challenged and re-directed outside of faculty of color's classrooms. I like to think of such students as a kind of dye into the field, like the kind medical doctors use: the dye that gets injected into your internal organs so that you can see where the problem areas are. We are not standing on the outside of racial violence in our discipline; we ourselves are encoding racial violence in how we constitute knowledge about people of color and how we are enacting racism with the people we hire and privilege as composition faculty.

There are, of course, position papers, policy statements, and white papers that we could design that need to address: guidelines for the awards granted to writing programs that explicitly communicate goals for culturally relevant literacy curricula offered to students of color; dispositions, research experiences, and practices to privilege when interviewing candidates to teach multilingual and multiracial students; articulations of PhD programming in the context of theory and praxis

related to teaching multilingual and multiracial students towards radical, anti-racist ends; definitions of ethics of practitioner research and qualitative studies for scholars who research in communities of color but do not represent or live in them. However, this kind of policy-building cannot replace simultaneous ideological analysis. I am talking about the kind of work that Wynter was asking of us in 1992: namely, that we interrogate the horizon of understanding that induces the collective behaviors of so many sites in the field where racist teachers carry forth composition classrooms and racist editors stamp new forms of knowledge-making.

Borrowing from Foucault's notion of the episteme, Wynter reminds us that race is a "classificatory logic," albeit fictional since it is a social construction that gets elaborated by our disciplinary paradigms. Wynter describes teachers and "universally-applicable" researchers as the "grammarians" of our order, those men and women who are able to directly reflect the frameworks, systems of value, and cognitive model that the discipline most desires (what she might call a sociogenic code) (*Do Not Call Us Negroes*). There is a discursive and pragmatic power, however, in the counter-narratives and counter-epistemologies that color-conscious compositionist-rhetoricians can use to rupture this horizon of desires. It is the work that Wynter was asking us to do in 1992 and 1994: the most dispossessed amongst us must turn the tide and become the intellectuals who (re)write the sociogenic codes of the discipline that currently bind us.

## ANOTHER DAY IN THE LIFE OF INSTITUTIONAL RACISM: A FINAL TEACHING NARRATIVE

Vickie, a young black woman and former student, a summa cum laude biology major and McNair scholar, was sent to her department's medical school advisor in her senior year of college. The advisor took one look at her, asked what her GPA was, and when she said 3.7, he told her she had no chance of going to medical school. He went on to explain to her that medical schools no longer accept "unqualified blacks" like her as they did in the 1970s and 1980s; that he only knew "one black girl" at the college who had ever gotten herself ready enough to get into medical school on her own "merit"; and that she probably wasn't going to do the same as "that other black girl." Other young black women shared similar stories about their "advisory" meetings: one woman was told that it was good she is Haitian because she will need Voodoo to pass her course; another was reluctantly told that she might, after all, actually make it into medical school since she was "only" applying to "those" medical schools at historically black colleges and universities. These are not things that happened years ago, but a few semesters ago, a seeming shock to many people who continually remind me: *yes, but look at Michelle Obama.*

When I have told this story to white audiences, many see each professor's attack as simply one, individual act of meanness, not systemic racism that structures black opportunities. And yet, it is the privilege under whiteness that only imagines such romantic individuality while Vickie and her peers are continually reminded on college campuses that they are *just black girls*. Vickie, however, cannot afford to understand this advisor as one, lone individual actor that the rest of the world won't replicate; and, at the same time, she can't let this man and that world eat away at her spirit and the

triumphant woman she already is, has been, and is becoming. These ways of reading the world, far more complicated than any skills-set we teach in our writing classrooms, are what we must imagine as central to college education today.

Though Vickie's university was among the three most "diverse" universities in the country, its "epidermic" diversity is mostly a historical accident, not one of the "intentionally figured counter-hegemonic discourse communities" that Theresa Perry describes when she looks at the history of HBCUs (Kynard and Eddy). This epidermic diversity has little, if anything, to do with understanding or rupturing institutional racism. In fact, diversity rhetoric works *alongside* institutional racism in the ways that corporate management schemas use diversity as mostly a marketing tool. "Lower-tiered universities" will especially promote their epidermic variability as their only competitive advantage in the food chain of college ranking scores. Current tropes of educating for diversity neither examine nor rupture the premises and beliefs of a social order that negates the poorest/of color segments of our population. Instead, paradigms of (especially linguistic) diversity trek relentlessly toward the creation of a multiple-languaged but standardized-English-speaking rainbow coalition of multiethnic consumers who can function in a homogenized (and collapsing) marketplace. Multiple "peoples of color" can be incorporated, via schooling, into the criterion reference of the middle class without sabotaging or contradicting the aims of current modes of capitalism. Legal scholars have especially shown how this appropriation and disconnection of diversity from race has resulted in color-blind law *while* de facto and de jure racial discrimination continue (Bell; Guinier; Orfield; Moses and Chang). Ladson-Billings ("Is The Team All Right?," "Preparing Teachers") and many other educational scholars, from Darling-Hammond to Swartz, have critiqued a set of teaching and learning practices under the hubris of diversity that work to actually block true inclusivity by: coding and lumping historically marginalized groups into one single-massed "other"; removing group identities, cultures, and political needs from view; obscuring racism, homophobia, and sexism; serving the interests of capital; and amassing add-on content to predesigned forms and models. The college that manages brown and black bodies by photographing them as happy smiling faces for corporate ad campaigns but then promotes the campus actors who denigrate them is well-aligned with what "diversity" means and achieves in this era. If we understand that we all work in managed universities in the way Bousquet has so brilliantly outlined for us (too many of us still don't want to really account for and notice the ways that we exist in the most corporatized versions of higher education ever seen), then we need to understand that capital and "management" in the U.S. have always reproduced racial hierarchies in distinct, powerful ways. Economically managed universities are no exception to this rule.

*But this story gets better.*

I was asked to serve on a panel for "teaching multicultural student populations" at the college and accepted the offer, thinking I would get in where I fit in, and used the moment to talk in great detail about Vickie's experience and what it means to alienate future black female doctors from a health care system that has stunningly failed to improve the health and mortality of black women. After describing Vickie's encounter on that campus, I asked what I thought might be some good questions:

- What if the discourses—those ways of speaking, writing, and thinking--- that we teach to students in schools are, in and of themselves, flawed and racist, or at least, problematically racialized? We can't really think that language and words do not matter, that language and words do not have consequence and material effect, can we?
- Can it really be a surprise that Vickie's advisor and his family are the dominant members of a system (both the medical profession and college campus) where African Americans have higher rates of avoidable hospital admissions<sup>1</sup>, where nearly 35 black women die per 100,000 births as opposed to 9 white women, where heart disease was 50% higher among black women than white women in the 1980s and has increased to 67% now?
- What are the connections between how Vickie is treated on this campus and a larger paradigm of structural racism where as a black woman, she has twice the cervical cancer mortality rate compared to white women, is 28% more likely to die of breast cancer than white women, and—as if all that wasn't enough—will live roughly five fewer years than white women?<sup>2</sup>

I am not suggesting here that white faculty's racism is the center of gravity for such a system of unequal health disparities. My point with listing so many health disparities was not to chronicle the ways that black women die at the expense of noticing our lives. Instead, my point here was to ask a different kind of question for those interested in the educational life of someone like Vickie: how is the macro-racism that Vickie faces *off campus* (see "Income and Poverty in Communities of Color: A Reflection on the 2009 U.S. Census Bureau Data") different from the world she must navigate *on campus*? Our language and epistemology on campus are not innocent, benign, or socially non-determinant.

In my brief moment on the panel, I argued that, as faculty, we needed to adopt an activist stance where we challenge colleagues who endanger our students' daily lives with what Critical Race Theorists call racial micro-aggressions. I also argued that we must challenge the overt, off-campus racism our students also encounter, like our Muslim students who can never drive home on break without being stopped by the NYPD or fly home without going through multiple searches at the airport. I questioned the desire to create tried-and-true lesson plans for every ethnic group, the pedagogical version of an ethnic food court, and instead asked that we not make students of color the smiling/happy objects of marketing's corporate ads but actual bodies with histories of racial subordination that they are living out, both on and off campus. That to me would be the definition of teaching racially and ethnically diverse student populations. But it all seemed to fall on deaf ears.

In the Q&A session, a white female professor waxed on prophetically on how she works with students to make sure they do not wear big earrings in the business world, pointing at me and my earrings, and right when I thought I would go in on her, I was just even more stunned: without even a pause about my earrings, she went on to discuss how she had to learn to teach "the Chinese girls" who do not know how to talk or think, fully deploying "Chinese" as the code name for Asian students on the campus, though our Asian student population was not made up predominantly of Chinese-American communities. And, as always, though the room was heavily populated by white, senior tenured faculty, it was me, the most junior and the only woman of color, who challenged her.

Since that day, this white woman has been promoted to dean; and Vickie's race-perpetrator is still the medical school advisor and has been promoted to director of scientific reasoning by a white male administrator who was sitting in the very audience of the panel discussion (given my description of her advisor and his long tenure at the university, he knew exactly who I was speaking of). As if that weren't enough, Vickie's perpetrator also directs the IRB office, which means he oversees all research on exactly the kinds of bodies he is utterly unable to value and humanize.

What I am suggesting here is that Vickie's experience, particularly under this corporate rubric of diversity, is routine, systematic, and systemic. None of these promotions are accidental or coincidental and for those who think I am simply a conspiracy theorist, I remind you of David Gillborn's argument that racism has never needed a conspiracy to be operational. As I have already iterated, I do not believe that *some* universities do not operate under these kinds of white supremacist cultural logics; whiteness doesn't require that we will all see or notice racism. What I am suggesting then is that in Vickie's routine experience, we see a crucial lens into the ways in which universities maintain white supremacy as a structure of both formal and informal rules where norms for the distribution of resources, benefits, and burdens are actively maintained.

It seems that in institutions where formerly white colleges and universities have experienced a browning and blackening of their student populations, not by conscious/deliberate action like with HBCUs but by geographic accident, racial anxieties actually increase for the most powerful, campus white stakeholders. The policing of black and brown bodies and minds gets escalated, a fate too many of us in the field do not readily challenge since many of us discuss racially subordinated students from university spaces that do not enroll many of them and, therefore, can often fetishize practice rather than engage the equally tangible and necessary work of interrogating the distinct kinds of institutional racism that still bar students of color from the very universities that enroll the largest number of them. Our inability to explicitly situate and name the acts of everyday institutional racism that are always inherent to teaching and to the literacies of our students seems stunningly related to James Gee's critique that what we have called our social turn--- and its focus solely on the social processes of learning—was never really political enough. We never really interrogated systems of power, though we may have certainly improved learning structures. In this absence of a deliberate critique of power, we ourselves created the very possibility that progressive philosophies of education could be completely co-opted by neoliberalism such that even corporate mechanisms under current standardization regimes sometimes sound like us: *we may have supplied a much too-neutral language.*

*But this story gets better still.*

While I was on the "multiculturalism panel," being schooled on the kind of earrings I need to wear, learning how "stupid" "Chinese girls" are, and hearing just how inaudible the suffering of black women and Muslim students is, I had numerous voicemail messages waiting for me as well as a barrage of emails. I was being called to campus security for something a student was claiming he wrote in my advanced, undergraduate composition class: *could I really be teaching about race theory?* was the question.

In the class, one student, who I will call Sammy, elected to write an essay that uses his own experiences as a multiracial young man to interrogate America's neo-racism. Sammy is biracial (A

Caribbean black father and white-skinned Latina mother) which, in his case, means he “looks Arab,” with features that he describes as “a long, pointy nose, protruding ears, long eyelashes, tan skin and bushy eyebrows”--- all of these racial descriptions are the student’s.) As someone who is most often labeled as Muslim, Islamic, or Arab, based solely on his appearance, Sammy is routinely subjected to stops and searches: when he is driving, every time he goes to the airport, at the subways and at every major transportation setting. His writing red-flagged the campus security office when he printed his assignment on a campus printer. While I was, quite literally, presenting on a panel about educating our multicultural student population, Sammy was called into security headquarters and interrogated about his writing. Not even 10 minutes after my panel presentation, I had to phone in and assure the campus-homeland security that Sammy had indeed completed this assignment for me.

I never talked about this moment publicly with anyone other than my undergraduate students. There were so few faculty of color on that campus, less than any other campus I have ever visited, taught at, or myself attended, that we see each other very little and amongst those who do have a critical race perspective (there are even fewer), well, let’s just say that we had our plates full. There was no single white ally anywhere on the campus, as was the case when I spoke up against a female faculty member’s racist targeting of our only black male student in the grad program. I had already witnessed what Thomas Ross describes as the perpetual twinning of white innocence with black abstraction: white perpetrators of racial violence look back with shame while the assault on black bodies gets completely divorced from very specific, centuries-old experiences of racism. White faculty, especially junior members, eventually found a way to fault the black male student as it protected their tenure trek or, rather, their whiteness; meanwhile, white graduate students distanced themselves altogether from the issue, though they are writing dissertations on race theory (Linda Smith’s work seems relevant here where she argues that Indigenous people have been the most researched subjects in western science but that has meant very little, if anything at all, for their liberation or the ease or end of their suffering.) No post-colonialist, no critical theorist, no African Americanist, and no queer theorist thought anything of this situation because they counted on white supremacy to let them sit on the sidelines and observe violence, racially mark the black male student as “difficult”; racially mark me as angry and inappropriate (I never seemed to pick the “right time” to discuss race with white people); and racially mark the white woman as “innocent” and “victim.” With a white male faculty and staff running to protect her moral and pedagogical virtue, this white woman was simply someone who had intended no harm, the usual escape hatch for racist perpetrators, enlivening a black counter-narrative that might aptly be traced back to Ida B. Wells’s *A Red Record* (one might wonder what an intentional racist act might look like if this is what white educators do when they are not acting intentionally.) With that kind of racial memory at an institution that shamelessly pimps its students’ epidermic diversity when it serves white corporate interests, I knew very well that the campus homeland security, all former NYPD, would have impunity in demonizing both Sammy and me.

On this Typical Day at a university campus, after relaying Vickie’s story about a man who would be eventually promoted, after being told that my earrings are inappropriate and that “Chinese girls” are stupid by someone promoted to upper level administration, after dealing with the campus

homeland security, I had to go teach my race theory class. I got there five minutes late and the students had already started the class without me, with Sammy leading, who, smarter than myself, had recorded the entire conversation with campus-homeland security. The students then basically directed a discussion with Sammy and myself where we uncovered that Sammy and I basically walked into our interrogation with the same focus and goals, though we did not talk to one another beforehand: 1) we were both told lies about one another that we automatically knew were concocted stories; 2) we referenced and quoted the same critical race scholars; 3) we walked in with a conscious decision to not bow our heads and act like good, scared Jim Crow Niggras; 4) we guessed our white male interrogator's questions beforehand; 5) we both used trickster, signifying motifs and answered all questions with questions. From that point on, if and when students wrote “dangerous” texts, they gave me a USB drive and I printed/read it from my computer at home or they took it back to the Old Skool: they hand-wrote their texts. It seems ironic that while brown and black bodies across the country use social media and technologies for subversive means, at this college, the most subversive technology for students to discuss race was paper and pen.

While the hyper-criminalization of Arab bodies in the context of a university that celebrates its diversity and multiculturalism seems a contradiction, it is actually a logical aftermath if we see that the ideological apparatus under diversity and multiculturalism sustains and propels racism. I am reminded here of Wynter's 1990 work in *'Do Not Call Us Negroes: How Multicultural Textbooks Perpetuate Racism* where she shows how new “code words” of minority, diversity, and cultural pluralism replace the terrain of race and only further marginalize the centrality of both black and Indigenous groups to the instituting of America.

## THE NARRATIVE ARC: A HAPPY ENDING

It is worth explicitly stating here that when my racially subordinated students were writing texts that fused and infused their experiences with critical analyses of race, their bodies, experiences, and voices posed enough of a threat that we had to communally design counter-surveillance textual productions to actually do racial analyses. I had printed out hundreds of articles by compositionists on campus printers. And while I may have *thought* those readings were radical, I have been never called into campus security for them. It wasn't until students did the racial analyses themselves in their own writing classroom that campus homeland security came *literally* calling for them and me. None of these academic texts for academic audiences that we imagine to be so socially transformative has held as much of a threat as when racially marginalized college students counter-narrated their own experiences with white supremacy on and off campus. I just assume that anything perceived this dangerous in the hands of young multiracial, working class, first generation college students *has got to be right*. It would seem to me then that this is a first order of business on a to-do list for a complete dismantling of the hegemony of diversity discourses in higher education that operationalize racial assaults on the bodies of students of color.

I want to return here to Leonardo's reminder that critical analyses of race have to begin with the objective experiences of racially subordinated masses, since it is not in the interest of such groups to

mystify the process of their own dehumanization. This seems critical to me in the field where even the texts that address race/anti-racism parade mostly white authors with an obligatory nod to the celebrity minorities of the field, allowing yet another publication of a white text by white authors who have often themselves perpetrated exactly the kinds of white supremacist violence that I have talked about in this piece. We need what LaNita Jacobs-Huey has described as *the natives* “gazing and talking back” in ways that explicitly interrogate *the daily operation of white supremacy in our field and on our campuses* rather than more performances of psychologically-internalized black pain for the white gaze (a practice that garners white attention and consumption, but never social change). I am not talking to or about those scholars seeking celebrity status, acceptance, or more face-time; this is work that requires you to make people *uncomfortable*. *Some folk gon need to get called out*. As Leonardo argues, in the least, this kind of focus on the objective experiences of racially subordinated masses as the frame for understanding the dynamics of structural power relations would finally move us away from always ONLY imagining a white audience when we write about race, literacy, life, and schooling. We only chokehold racial understanding and change when we proceed at what he so aptly calls the “snail’s pace of the white imaginary” (Leonardo 80).

Insomuch that the stories I am telling here can have a happy ending, I will tell you that Vickie was accepted into each of the nine medical schools to which she applied with full scholarship. Sammy is at a MFA program that will allow him to focus more fully on racial experiences. The success that I see in Vickie’s and Sammy’s final endings is not in their material accomplishments but in their consciousness and ability to both navigate and *counter-narrate* the white supremacy they have faced and will continue to face, both on and off campus---two sides of the same coin. We need to follow their lead and counter-narrate the mainstream assumptions on which far too many have built their ideas about literacy and action in higher education.

## CODA

In this coda, I am offering a series of contemplative questions. I imagine two audiences here: 1) marginalized faculty/graduate students who are in the midst of or will soon experience antagonistic racial encounters on their campuses; 2) folk who want to better understand what I am talking about and how it impacts my critiques of and frustrations with both the academy and our field. By centering questions, I am asking readers to insert themselves into and experience a sense of urgency about the issues I have discussed. There are no *right or wrong* answers here, but you **MUST** come up with answers. Treat these questions as a lens onto a landscape that many may not have looked at closely before *but as promises of what is coming in the very near future for YOU*.

1. Think back on the excerpt about Vickie. Imagine that Vickie comes to you in tears about what her medical school advisor has told her. What will you say to her? What will you say, in that moment, such that when she walks out of your office, you will contribute to the humanity that she has been denied? What’s *your* script? Now, imagine that this is the kind of exchange you have in your office at least once a week. What will you do to rejuvenate *yourself* so that you can return each week without feeling depleted? To borrow

- from Wynter's notion of disciplinary sense-making: how does our field make sense of (i.e., explain, theorize, research, discuss, etc.) such routine interactions on our campuses?
2. Vickie is now in medical school. However, the professor who racially marked her as inferior is still at the university, with an even more privileged post than he had before with access to even more students of color. What will you do to counter his impact? You should assume, as is the case in this story, that no other administrator supports your concerns (*yes, you MUST STICK with this fact; do not retreat to your privilege and assume that when you talk, you will be heard*). Who will you talk to? What will you do? What is your role as a teacher? As an activist? As a WPA? To borrow from Wynter's notion of disciplinary sense-making: how does our field make sense of (i.e., explain, theorize, research, discuss, etc.) such routine promotions on our campuses?
  3. Visit Dr. Yaba Blay's website and read her post about Tiana Parker, the seven-year old girl in Tulsa, Oklahoma who was dismissed from school in 2013 because she wore dreadlocks (<http://yabablay.com/a-care-package-for-tiana-locs-of-love/>). What is the college version of your "care package" for black girls like Vickie? To borrow from Wynter's notion of disciplinary sense-making: how does our field make sense of (i.e., explain, theorize, research, discuss, etc.) such experiences of black girls in schools?
  4. Imagine that the one and only black, Arab, or Latino male in your class creates a writing portfolio where he has extensively researched police brutality and racial profiling and has also included his own personal experiences. Campus security reads the work since it was printed on the university server and so questions you about your class and your curriculum. What will you do? What will you say? What will you say to the student about his writing in the context of his campus experience? What is your role? For those of you who will simply prevent the one and only black, Arab, or Latino male in your class from writing about such issues, how do you describe your curriculum, teaching philosophy, and writing politics given this prohibition? To borrow from Wynter's notion of disciplinary sense-making: how does our field make sense of (i.e., explain, theorize, research, discuss, etc.) such routine experiences for black, Arab, or Latino men on our campuses?
  5. You are at a new university and you represent a marginalized group there (in terms of gender, race, sexuality, class, religion, size, ability, there is no one else in the department like you). Every semester of your graduate course, students write about this marginalized group of which you are a member in denigrating terms. Every. Single. Semester. You are the only person in your department facing this dilemma. What will you do? Assume that there is no willing mentor on your campus, who will you talk to (*yes, you MUST STICK with this fact; do not retreat to your privilege and assume that you always have supportive colleagues*)? Where will you go in the field---in the publications or at the conferences---where you can find intellectual work that addresses these issues? If you don't find a wide range of such publications or conferences, what do you think accounts for this silence? To borrow, one last time, from Wynter's notion of disciplinary sense-making: how does our field make sense of (i.e., explain, theorize, research, discuss, etc.) racism in education, inside

and outside of classrooms?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>(i.e., hospitalizations for health conditions that, in the presence of comprehensive primary care, rarely require hospitalization) Go to <http://www.ahrq.gov/qual/nhdr03/nhdrsum03.htm>

<sup>2</sup>See [www.blackwomenshealth.org](http://www.blackwomenshealth.org)

WORKS CITED

- Alfred, Mary. "Reconceptualizing Marginality from the Margins: Perspective of African American Tenured Female Faculty at a White Research University." *Western Journal of Black Studies* 25.1 (2001): 1-11. Print.
- Barone, Thomas. "Narrative Researchers as Witnesses of Injustice and Agents of Social Change?" *Educational Researcher* 38.8 (2009): 591-97. Print.
- Bell, Derrick. "Diversity's Distractions." *Columbia Law Review* 103 (2003): 1622-1633. Print.
- . *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*. New York: Basic Books, 1993. Print.
- . "Racial Realism." *Connecticut Law Review* 24.2 (1992): 363-79. Print.
- . "Racial Realism in Retrospect." *Reason and Passion: Justice Brennan's Enduring Influence*. Eds. Joshua Rosenkranz and Bernard Schwartz. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997. 199-206. Print.
- . *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform*. New York: Oxford UP, 2004. Print.
- Black Women's Health Imperative, 2002. Web. 15 July 2010.
- Blay, Yaba. "[A Care Package for Tiana: Locs of LOVE](#)." *Dr. Yaba Blay: Professor, Scholar, Producer*, 6 Sep. 2013. Web. 6 Sep. 2013.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006. Print.
- Bousquet, Marc. *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*. New York UP, 2008. Print.
- Carretta, Vincent. *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of A Genius in Bondage*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2011. Print.
- Cleveland, Darrell. *A Long Way to Go: Conversations about Race by African American Faculty and Graduate Students at Predominantly White Institutions*. New York: Lang, 2004. Print.
- Coulter, Cathy, and Mary Lee Smith. "The Construction Zone: Literary Elements in Narrative Research." *Educational Researcher* 38.8 (2009): 577-90. Print.
- Darling-Hammond, Linda. "What Happens to a Dream Deferred? The Continuing Quest for Equal Educational Opportunity." *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*. Eds. James Banks and C. McGee. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004. 607-30. Print.
- Delgado, Richard. "Derrick Bell's Racial Realism: A Commentary on White Optimism And Black Despair." *Connecticut Law Review* 24 (1992). Print.
- Dixon, Adrienne, and Celia Rousseau. *Critical Race Theory in Education: All God's Children Got a Song*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Doak, Robin S. *Phillis Wheatley: Slave and Poet*. Minneapolis: Compass Point, 2007. Print.
- Fenelon, James. "Race, Research, and Tenure: Institutional Credibility and the Incorporation of African, Latino, and American Indian Faculty." *Journal of Black Studies* 34.1 (2003): 87-100. Print.
- Gates, Henry Louis Jr. *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters With the Founding Fathers*. New York: Basic Civitas, 2003. Print.
- Gee, James Paul. "The New Literacy Studies: From 'Socially Situated' to the Work of the Social." *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context*. Eds. David Barton, Mary Hamilton, and Roz Ivanic. Psychology Press, 2000. 180-96. Print.

- Gillborn, David. *Racism and Education: Coincidence or Conspiracy?* New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- Gonick, Maria and Janice Hladki. "Who Are the Participants? Rethinking Representational Practices and Writing with Heterotopic Possibility in Qualitative Inquiry." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 18.3 (2005): 285-304. Print.
- Guinier, Lani. "Admissions Rituals as Political Acts: Guardians at the Gates of Our Democratic Ideals." *Harvard Law Review* 117.1 (2003): 113-224. Print.
- Guinier, Lani and Gerald Torres. *The Miner's Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002. Print.
- Gutiérrez y Muhs, Gabriella, Yolanda Flores Niemann,, Carmen G. González, and Angela P. Harris, eds. *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2012. Print.
- "Income and Poverty in Communities of Color: A Reflection on the 2009 U.S. Census Bureau Data." Center for Research and Policy in the Public Interest, 2010. Retrieved Summer 2010. PDF file.
- Jacobs-Huey, LaNita. "The Natives are Gazing and Talking Back: Reviewing the Problematics of Positionality, Voice, and Accountability among 'Native' Anthropologists." *American Anthropologist* 104.3 (2002): 791-804. Print.
- Kynard, Carmen, and Robert Eddy. "Toward a New Critical Framework: Color-Conscious Political Morality and Pedagogy at Historically Black and Historically White Colleges and Universities." *College Composition and Communication* 61.1 (September 2009): W24-W44. Print.
- Ladson-Billings, Gloria. *Crossing Over to Canaan: The Journey of New Teachers in Diverse Classrooms*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001. Print.
- . "Is the Team All Right? Diversity and Teacher Education." *Journal of Teacher Education* 56.2 (2005): 229-34. Print.
- . "Preparing Teachers for Diverse Student Populations: A Critical Race Theory Perspective." *Review of Research in Education* 24.1 (1999): 211-47. Print.
- Ladson-Billings, Gloria and William Tate. "Toward a Theory of Critical Race Theory in Education." *Teachers College Record* 97.1 (1995): 47-68. Print.
- Langley, April C. E. *The Black Aesthetic Unbound: Theorizing the Dilemma of Eighteenth-Century African American Literature*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2008. Print.
- Leonardo, Zeus. *Race, Whiteness, and Education*. New York: Routledge, 2009. Print.
- Luke, Allan. "Generalizing Across Borders: Policy and the Limits of Educational Science." *Educational Researcher* 40.8 (2011): 367-77. Print.
- Moses, Michele and Mitchell Chang. "Toward a Deeper Understanding of the Diversity Rationale." *Educational Researcher* 35.1 (2006): 6-11. Print.
- National Healthcare Disparities Report, 2003. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2003. Web. 15 March 2015.
- Orfield, Gary. "The Access Crisis in Higher Education." *Educational Policy* 19 (2005): 255-61. Print.
- Powell, Malea. "Stories Take Place." *College Composition and Communication* 64.2 (2012): 383-406. Print.
- Richardson, Elaine. *African American Literacies*. New York and London: Routledge, 2003. Print.
- Richardson, Laurel. *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1997. Print.
- . "Getting Personal: Writing Stories." *Qualitative Studies in Education* 14.1 (2001): 33-38.

- . "Poetic Representations of Interviews." *Postmodern Interviewing*. Eds. Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein. London: Sage, 2003. 187-201. Print.
- . "Writing: A Method of Inquiry." *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Eds. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2000. 923-48. Print.
- Roediger, David. *How Race Survived U.S. History: From Settlement and Slavery to the Obama Phenomenon*. New York: Verso, 2008. Print.
- Ross, Thomas. "The Rhetorical Tapestry of Race: White Innocence and Black Abstraction." *William & Mary Law Review* 32.1 (1990): 1-40. Print.
- Sadao, Kathleen, and Linda Johnsrud. "The Common Experience of 'Otherness': Ethnic and Racial Minority Faculty." *Review of Higher Education* 21.4 (1998): 315-42. Print.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People*. Zed Books, 1999. Print.
- Stanley, Christine. *Faculty of Color: Teaching in Predominantly White Colleges and Universities*. Bolton: Anker, 2006. Print.
- Stanley, Christine et al. "A Case Study of the Teaching Experiences of African American Faculty at Two Predominantly White Research Universities." *Journal of Excellence in College Teaching* 14.1 (2003): 151-78. Print.
- Swartz, Ellen. "Diversity: Gatekeeping Knowledge and Maintaining Inequalities." *Review of Educational Research* 79.2 (June 2009): 1044-1083. Print.
- Thomas, Gloria and Carol Hollenshead. "Resisting from the Margins: The Coping Strategies of Black Women and Other Women of Color Faculty Members at a Research University." *Journal of Negro Education* 70.3 (2002): 166-75. Print.
- Turner, Caroline. "Incorporation and Marginalization in the Academy: From Border Toward Center for Faculty of Color." *Journal of Black Studies* 34.1 (2003): 112-25. Print.
- Wynter, Sylvia. *"Do Not Call Us Negros": How Multicultural Textbooks Perpetuate Racism*. San Francisco: Aspire, 1990. Print.
- . "'No Humans Involved': An Open Letter to My Colleagues." *Forum N.H.I.: Knowledge for the 21st Century* 1.1 (1994): 42-72. Print.
- . "'No Humans Involved': An Open Letter to My Colleagues." *Voices of the African Diaspora: The CAAS Research Review* 8.2 (1992): 13-16. Print.
- Yosso, Tara, Laurence Parker, Daniel Solorzano, and Marvin Lynn. "From Jim Crow to Affirmative Action and Back Again: A Critical Race Discussion of Racialized Rationales and Access to Higher Education." *Review of Research in Education* 28 (2004): 1-26. Print.
- Young, Morris. *Minor Re/Visions: Asian American Literacy Narratives as a Rhetoric of Citizenship*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2005. Print.

# PROYECTO CARRITO

## When The Student Receives an "A" and The Worker Gets Fired: Disrupting the Unequal Political Economy of Translingual Rhetorical Mobility

Tamera Marko Emerson College  
Mario Ernesto Osorio Emerson College  
Eric Sepeoski Emerson College  
Ryan Catalani Emerson College

### KEYWORDS

immigration, latin america, workers, janitors, translingual

### A NOTE ON INTERACTIVE FORM

We and the journal editors have designed this article as a hybrid of academic essay and multi-media narrative that combines written-word, video, song, photographs, 3-D renders and an interactive blog. Each of these elements are equally important dimensions of the narrative and mutually inform each other. This format invites readers to read in multiple ways and orders. For example, some people might read the written word text from top to bottom first and then click on the links to various multi-media dimensions. Others might read each item in order as it appears on the page, written word text, video clips, songs and images. Still others might want to read the multi-media blog first to see our context and then read this article which analyzes it. Please feel free to leave a video or written-word comment on our Proyecto Carrito blog, <http://projectocarritoblog.mobility17.com/>

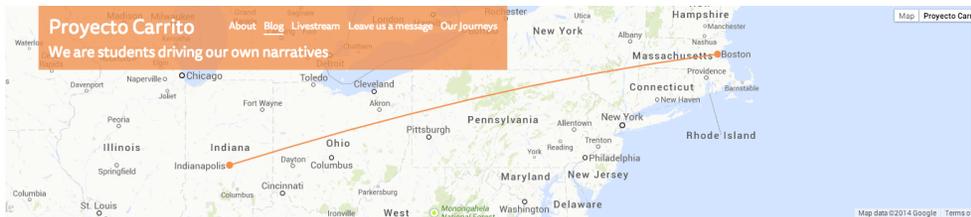


Fig. 1. See <http://mobility17.com/projecto-carrito/donate/> for more information.

I think that all of this anti-immigrant movement has a lot to do with the education our children receive in school.

—Mario Osorio, *Emerson College Maintenance Worker*<sup>1</sup>

What does this have to do with Emerson College?

—*Editor of The Berkeley Beacon, Emerson College Student Newspaper on why he rejected our proposal to publish maintenance workers' writing.*

If I could change the world, I would change \_\_\_\_\_. *Proyecto Carrito* began, though we did not know it yet, with this prompt in our English-Language-Learning (ELL) writing class. It was Fall 2011, the second year that Tamera Marko and Eric Sepenoski were co-teaching this class at Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts.<sup>2</sup> All of the students in this class were Emerson College maintenance workers (janitorial staff). All of them came to the United States because war, violence and poverty forced them to flee their homes in Latin America and seek a better life for themselves and their families. They range in age from 35 years old to 68 years old and have been working at Emerson cleaning toilets and dorms and shoveling snow for eight to twenty three years. To first come to the United States, most of them crossed three borders—on foot. Some crossed the final border between Latin America and the United States lying down with four or five others crammed in the trunks of cars. One man in our writing class, upon reaching his third international border, just minutes from crossing into the United States, was robbed of all his money and clothes. Naked in the street, he nearly died until a stranger took him into her house and lent him clothes and her phone to call his family back in his home country for help. A

woman in our writing class, now a mother of five children, also has a story of border-crossing violence and resilience. She and her mother and father had decided it would be best for her and her family if she would flee war and hunger in their home country and make a living in the United States. She



Fig. 2. Students for Rhetorical Mobility class in early planning stages for Proyecto Carrito. Conference room: Office of Diversity and Inclusion at Emerson College. Photo by Ryan Catalani.

was seventeen years old. She left her newborn baby behind with her mother until she could arrange to send for her. Upon crossing the desert on foot with a small group, the guide (a *coyote*) withheld food and water from her because she refused to have sexual relations with him. She found a piece of plastic in the sand and with this survived by drinking her own breast milk. Though they communicated through telephone calls, she and her mother never saw each other in person again. By the time she was able to return to her home village, her mother had been killed.

Mario Osorio, a student in our class, after five years of working closely together on immigrant rights to education in general, has just begun to tell us a few details of his own journey from his home in El Salvador to the United States. He has become the most prolific writer in our class. He brought in an essay he had written by hand. His essay proposed:

If I could change the world, I too would pass immigration reform for all immigrants who live in the United States. This reform would honor this beautiful country's family values by passing and enforcing a law that would keep immigrant families together so we can avoid all the suffering we are enduring, especially the most defenseless among us: our children.

As we can see in many media reports in the last several days, our children are suffering the most from the recent Alabama anti-immigrant bill HB-56<sup>3</sup> that a Federal Judge approved part of two weeks ago. Many terrified Hispanics have hidden themselves in their homes or have fled Alabama, a state where K-12 schools have reported high levels of absenteeism since HB-56 passed. This is because as part of this law, children are now required to present legal documentation of resident status of themselves and of their parents. Children who cannot prove their resident status can be detained by the police, and via deportation, children can be separated from their families. Many parents have signed documents granting permission from friends and other family members to care for their children should they be arrested or deported. Other Alabama residents are worried because their services to water might be cut off (Osorio, "WE CAN(T)? LIVE IN HARMONY?" 1).

Mario also brought into class the Spanish language Boston newspaper *El Planeta*, which had published an article in its October 14-20, 2011 issue quoting an Alabama resident and mother of two little girls. This mother said that since the passing of HB-56, "Each time I leave [my home] I don't know if I will return. I can't stop working. My children need shoes and other things" (2). The title of this article, translated



Fig. 3. Students for Rhetorical Mobility Class at Emerson College. Photo by Tamera Marko.

into English, was “Demonizing Immigrants.”

On the cover of this publication is a picture of a little Latina girl holding a sign that says “Remember Robert Bentley, I am American like you and your grandchildren.” When Mario stopped reading, the eight class members seated around the table were silent, many with tears in their eyes. Then we erupted in applause. A year before, Mario had always come to class but without having done any of the writing homework. For a small book we published of our writing that year, Mario wrote no more than two sentences:

I have a very interesting story. Someday I will write it all down. Right now, I just want to dedicate this to my child. (Osorio, *English Conversation* 23)

Mario’s classmates all congratulated him on doing the writing and research and expressed their amazement at how poetic and articulate his writing was. Mario then asked if this essay represented the class members’ perspectives and what, if anything, would *we* add? Immediately the class came alive with conversation. In the last three years when Mario, Tamera or Eric present these points at academic conferences, many audience members there, usually academics, ask hard questions about why Mario chose to focus so heavily on “U.S. ‘family values’”? Why focus so much on “making the United States a ‘stronger country’”? Why not get angrier at the United States? Why not challenge the hypocrisy of U.S. “family values.”? Mario and immigrant workers on our panels explain that for them the chance to give their family a better life is the only reason they left everything behind to come to the United States. Mario also pointed out it was his strategy to “safely” protest the law. Mario in particular sees this rhetoric of family in his texts as “fighting fire with fire.” This is the same strategy the immigrant writers in our class say they often use to gently protest anti-immigrant sentiment and law in general. That is, they focus on something they believe all of us have in common and can care about, regardless of our politics and country of birth: protecting our children from harm and being separated from their parents. That day in class after Mario read the first essay he had written in his life, we filled two white boards full of ideas about how to change the world by changing our College. Specifically, a theme emerged—we sought to change our College in ways that would provide a more inclusive and humane twenty-first-century education. The worker writers in the room identified what they all agreed were the three most important changes we could implement as employees, students, parents, and teachers at Emerson:

1. Be more united among Latin@s<sup>4</sup> and Latin Americans.
2. Cultivate desire to learn about Latin Americans’ culture, histories, and immigration contexts.
3. Say good morning to us. (Mario, “WE CAN(T)? LIVE IN HARMONY? 2)

The last request is a deep and serious one. The immigrant writers often wrote about how the small moments in their daily lives working at Emerson College pained them because it was as if they were ghosts, *fantasmas*, cleaning the walls. They said they felt that way because people did not talk to them or look at them in elevators, in the hallways, in the bathrooms. This is very different than Latin American culture, in which a face-to-face greeting of hello is the minimum of respect for another human being, no matter their institutional status. This greeting is expected in the contexts in which the immigrants come from and in the Latin@ neighborhoods in Boston where

they now live. Tamera proposed that we revise Mario's essay into a group editorial (from Mario and our class members) and submit it for publication to the Emerson College student newspaper *The Berkeley Beacon*. When we submitted our final revision for consideration, we were told by the *Beacon* section editor that he did not understand "what this article has to do with Emerson."



Tamera Marko <seasalt17@gmail.com>

## Beacon Opinion Article Submission

1 message

tmako <tamera\_marko@emerson.edu>

Wed, Nov 9, 2011 at 1:54 PM

To: [REDACTED]  
Cc: Ernesto Osorio <ernesto\_osorio@emerson.edu>

Dear [REDACTED]

Thank you for talking with me a few minutes ago by phone about this Opinion piece we have attached to this email for your consideration. In ways similar to Occupy Boston, this Opinion article subject has strong and powerfully current connections with Emerson College in three main ways. 1) This piece is written by Emerson College staff members of the Facilities Department (maintenance workers) from Latin America. 2) Boston has the second largest number of Latin Americans and Latinos/as in any city in the United States. 3) This is one of the first public responses directly from Latin Americans in the Emerson College community directly affected by one of the most brutal anti-immigration laws just passed in large part in the state of Alabama. This law reverberates throughout the Latin American and Latino/a community in Boston and throughout the United States. Many of our Latin American and Latina/o Emerson College students, in fact, are impacted by this law. We are hearing about this law throughout Emerson College campus, in hallways, elevators, student lounges etc.

Fig. 4. Email from Tamera Marko to an editor at the Emerson College newspaper *The Berkeley Beacon*.

The *Beacon* never published our editorial. The week we submitted our piece, an editorial written by the same editor who rejected our submission, was published. It was a full-page spread on the Occupy Movement and the tent city set up in Boston. There was no question in any of our class members' minds that an article about the Occupy Movement should be published. What baffled us, however, is why the Latin American immigrant maintenance workers cleaning the toilets at Emerson College, where this newspaper's editors and staff members are also students and residents, did not count in their minds as part of the 99 percent who could share space and voice on his editorial page? The maintenance workers are certainly not part of the wealthy one percent. Again, this then resulted in the workers feeling invisible, ghosts, *fantasmas*. This story is one example of how some students find it difficult to see the people cleaning their toilets at College as potential teachers, let alone relevant to their daily lives as students. It also reveals ways that, to some members of the College, these maintenance workers' expertise, knowledge, and artistic production is invisible. This example also reveals ways that blockages in circulation of workers' stories, particularly stories of immigrant workers within the same College as students, faculty, and staff, reinforces and reproduces this invisibility. In our fifth year of class together, we have come to realize that the maintenance workers are indeed the teachers in this scenario and the undergraduates who are a core part of our group actively seek them out for advice on research projects about immigration but also in terms of life issues, like how to navigate the emotional pain of a financial crisis or losing a grandmother. It is because of our creative and pedagogical work and human relationships with each other and

the blockage of the publication of our writing about them that we came to call our class a collective and go by a new name: *Students for Rhetorical Mobility*. One member of our collective, Andrea Gordillo, who graduated last June and is now working for immigrant women's rights in El Paso, Texas, regularly signs off her emails with: "in peace, love and rhetorical mobility." Andrea Skypes into our Students for Rhetorical Mobility class every week and is an active part of our editorial board.

## FROM REJECTION TO A COMMUNITY

In the United States, maintenance workers are seen as ignorant, without any kind of education. For that reason we are invisible in their eyes. But they are wrong because many of us have a certain level of academic education. Some of us were professionals in our home countries, but for having immigrated and not knowing the language fluently, it is harder for us to develop our abilities. I personally believe that we all have the same abilities regardless of where we come from. But all of these difficulties don't matter to us, not as long as our families are well. (Mario Osorio, "Conference" 4)

At first, this student newspaper rejection devastated the Maintenance worker students in our class, especially Mario, who did not write another word for our class for another year and a half. As a teacher, I agonized over whether I had made a mistake in pushing our class to submit for publication. For a few weeks, our class morale floundered and I thought maybe some of the members might give up and leave our group. Then, a fundamental shift happened in the pedagogical approach and community membership of our class. The workers suggested we invite some undergraduate students to be part of our class. They knew that the undergraduates needed to know their stories, they needed to understand why they had to immigrate and why they chose to stay in their maintenance worker jobs in the United States, so far from their other country's loved ones and cultural roots. They knew Tamera was teaching translingual research writing classes to first-year students. They knew these classes required students to apply to be in the class and thus, choose its theme: immigration issues and perspectives in twenty first-century education. In the class, which has an official bilingual (Spanish-English) designation appearing on student transcripts, students focus mostly on immigration in the Americas. Tamera, reluctantly at first, agreed to invite a few undergraduates into the maintenance worker class. Tamera's concern, which she kept private to herself at first, was that the morale of the immigrant worker writer class might be further hurt by students' (understandable but real) inability to understand what was at stake with this class in terms of trust, commitment, and risk of a new kind of worker-student classroom space. It would require a depth and intensity of student engagement in texts, flesh and blood people, and issues unfolding in real time in ways that many of these young undergraduates might never have experienced in school. At first, it seemed that Tamera's concerns had been accurate. During the first fifteen minutes of the first class with the undergraduates and workers together, the tension in the room was palpable. The workers, usually lively and talkative in every class period, lowered their eyes and went silent the second the undergraduates walked into the room. This is partly because they had been trained to do this when cleaning dorms and bathrooms of the students. This was also because, as each worker later said when we debriefed about

this first meeting, the maintenance workers felt intimidated because they “did not have education” or “speak English well” like these undergraduates. They felt, in that moment, that the “real” students had arrived. Suddenly, Maria spoke. She is the eldest in our group. She herself had left her three young children behind in her home country and over the years, working two full time jobs cleaning, brought each one of them to the United States and is now a grandmother of six and surrounded by her family. Maria looked around the room and said in gentle voice, “I have been working here for 23 years. But, in all my time here, I attend your graduations. Each time I see one of you walk across that stage to receive your diploma, I feel so proud because I know that although I just clean your toilets, in some small way, I am part of your success too.” She cried as she said it and nearly everyone in the class cried too. Since this first student-worker encounter in our class, Tamera learned she could not have been more wrong about doubting the possibilities of consciousness and learning that could come from integrating (carefully selected) undergraduates with workers. A year later, Maria finally told us that nearly three decades ago she herself had graduated from university and had been a pharmacist in her home country.

## TOWARD A THEORY OF LABOR ACTIVISM AS STORY-TELLING

Our class has grown to include the same core group of seven workers and a core group of fifteen undergraduates, all of them no longer receiving course credit and attending our class even when they transfer to other Colleges or even graduate. This semester we have a new worker student who turns out to be from the same island in the Philippines as one of our undergraduate students’ grandfathers. These two students excitedly talked, in that now little spoken island dialect, about catching fish with their hands. Last semester three students remained in our class via Skype: one had graduated and was working for immigrant women’s rights in El Paso, Texas, another was in study abroad in Barcelona, Spain, and another was finishing her master’s degree and teaching in immigrant bilingual education in California. We have become a community inside the institution and one that transcends it. A Colombian artist, Marcia Cecilia Cardona Gaviria (Ceci), who had come to exhibit her work at Emerson College in 2011 through a project that Tamera founded,<sup>5</sup> has since graduated from the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in Medellín and wrote a grant to fund an artist residency in 2015 to work as a photographer and documentary filmmaker with our collective and Proyecto Carrito in Boston. She is motivated to work with Proyecto Carrito because she herself understands the invisibility workers can feel. In Colombia, her parents lived in a small town without much access to university education. So her parents made the painful decision to allow her to go live in the city of Medellín to study. She understands deeply the tension and sacrifice that comes with leaving, temporarily, at least geographically, sacred family roots to get an education. She also understands being forced to survive by doing low-paid jobs, including cleaning, in a context in which, to some extent, she has been invisible to those for whom she works. Ceci since has dedicated her art to working with story tellers whose stories are often not told, and rarely in their own words and images. She has worked with women who raise families on a former city trash dump and indigenous groups in the *Selva Pacífica*

(Jungle inland from the Pacific Coast) to map how *they* see their own surroundings, what they need and how they think they might meet those needs. She especially focuses on collaborating with people to tell their stories in the context of place and their experiences and feelings in those places (towns, countries, homes, rivers, etc.).<sup>6</sup>

The undergraduates become so invested in the maintenance class, they showed up all semester long and did several class research projects about it, including field research on janitorial English classes at Harvard. Our class has extended into the fabric of our College and daily lives, on and off campus. We eat lunch together, undergraduates attend church services with the workers, and we have dinners at each other's homes. When the undergraduate's suffer the death of a grandparent, they seek out the workers in our class, who are their elders and are adept at moving through loss. We text each other immediately when we learn of one of our members' pain and within minutes mobilize with messages of support. At each encounter, our consciousness deepens. It has taken each of us years of coming together and writing together to realize that developing consciousness is a core dimension of what we are actually doing. Tamera often internally struggled because we are not changing the unequal structural and material conditions of worker-student: we are not unionizing, bargaining for higher wages, or striking for workers to have a more equitable access to university resources. But, the workers in the class did not want to change the(ir) world this way.

There are four main reasons that the workers did not wish to fight for unionization or go on strike. First, they have already lived through so much war and violence that they do not wish to engage in more such struggle. Second, they know first-hand from their families, neighbors, and friends that one of the first things that happens when immigrant workers go on strike is that their family members might be inspected by government officials regarding their documentation that proves their legal status in the United States. In other words, one worker's, undergraduate's, or faculty member's activism can put at risk the deportation of several of the worker's family members, friends and co-workers. Third, the workers in our collective believe they have better salaries and working conditions than their counterparts at other local universities and colleges. Finally, many of them are close to retirement age and are putting their children and grandchildren through college in the United States. They say *this* work for their children—who to them are the future for all of us, immigrant and U.S.-born—is their activism.

This tension between what we consider the next activist step is a regular part of our class discussion and our projects. It is precisely this tension that reveals ways in which immigrant rights are (usually unintentionally) institutionalized much differently than student rights. In other words, access to educational institutional resources is drastically different for undergraduates versus the immigrant maintenance workers. To check out books at the library, to attend a conference, to enroll in a class all involve a series of processes that are considered a right for the undergraduates and often involve painfully difficult bureaucratic processes for the workers to acquire special permission. For example, when our panel was accepted to the Conference on College Composition and Communication (a National Writing Studies Academic Conference), we discussed how to navigate the faculty, undergraduate, and worker time off to attend. For faculty members and students, this was considered part of our professional development and even funded. The workers

had to choose to take vacation days off work and negotiate tensions with their bosses who then had to hire a replacement for those days or ask another worker to pick up the extra labor. One student said, “What if the undergraduates who stay behind clean the bathrooms while you are away giving a conference?” Immediately the workers’ vehemently declined the offer, saying “this work is not for you.” When a student proposed this to an administrator, he said, “Oh no! What would happen if the Board of Trustees or the parents hear that they are paying thousands of dollars for their kid to clean toilets! And they [the students] might get a disease!” When we recounted the response as we gathered together for class, we looked around the room blinking at each other. The border clearly bleeds into our classroom and the College as a whole.

This is precisely why we as a class decided to begin writing down our perspectives about immigration and inclusive twenty first-century education, starting with our own stories of immigration and education. It is also why we decided to auto-publish this writing. Throughout our years as students, workers, faculty and administrators working and socializing together we realized that what we had collectively done as a class, we wanted to duplicate in the larger arena of our classrooms, dorm rooms, faculty meetings, and professional conferences. That is, we wanted to widen and deepen a perspective in the ongoing and increasingly intense conversation at educational institutions nationwide about immigration and inclusive education. Furthermore, we want this perspective to be informed by and told through the stories of the immigrants who have among the most firsthand expertise with this subject: the immigrants working, often as janitors, inside the school itself. Many of these workers also have children who are now going to elementary schools and universities in the United States and who have benefited (or not) by laws, policies, and stereotypes regarding immigration, including the Dream Act, affirmative action policies, deportation and documentation issues. In the language of academic ethnographic research or documentary work, the maintenance workers at many universities, including Emerson, are insightful storytellers, anthropological “informants,” and rich case studies. This is why we are now writing our auto-ethnographies in historical, socio-political, economic, and institutional contexts.

We have also realized that our writing—which we all agree we want to do—*is* activist. By this, we mean that our writing is actually changing the structural and material conditions in which our group of faculty, undergraduates, and students form relationships with each other, off and on campus. Furthermore, this slowly but consistently deepens our consciousness about ways we are all involved in immigration issues. By carefully building and sustaining true relationships with each other over years, our work together extends beyond the institutional semester class structure of beginnings and endings and subsequent relational ruptures (such as summer, winter, and spring breaks). Telling and listening to each other’s stories has, literally, changed our lives. Sandra Lorenzano writes about this kind of complex rhetorical exchange in terms of “dialogue.” She writes:

If “another” is the chief of gifts, if it is what gives real meaning to existence, then dialogue is privilege, shared creation, the desire and possibility of inventing a universe with another, without giving up one’s own physiognomy; it is responsibility and at the same time play, reflection and provocation. In dialogue we are what is given: we give ourselves to ourselves and to each other, in order to show to others that we are here, that that they

interest us, that we need them.

Dialogue allows us to discover what makes us similar, but also what sets us apart. It is the supreme challenge of our capacity to accept, where **tension** and **contradictions**, **agreements** and **differences** are resolved in a **double gaze**, in a **common quest**. (2)



Fig. 5. Sharing dinner and stories between undergraduates and workers. This is in Maria Portillo's home in East Boston where her husband shared stories from his family album documenting his life in his home Latin American country. Photo by Tamera Marko.

In the case of our class, we have come to see our process as not just a “double gaze,” but rather a *prismatic gaze*. This sustained gaze, simultaneously inspiring and painful, allows us to see each other eye to eye—as workers, students, faculty and higher ranking staff—and face the constant tension of the drastic differences in our material conditions and institutional status at the same College, in the same city, in the same world. It is not in spite of this tension that our prismatic gaze is

necessary, it is *because* of this tension that we remain dedicated to each other and finding a way to articulate and circulate our stories to make our community's material conditions and social and institutional status more equitable. For us to be able to write together, we had to know each other. For this, we had to listen to and deeply contemplate each other's stories. Because of the differences in our material conditions and institutional statuses and through listening to each other's stories, we have also had to face another uncomfortable difference: how articulating and circulating our stories impacts us. First, there is a drastically unequal level of risk. Those most deeply impacted by violence and immigration take the most risks and receive the least benefits from sharing their stories about it. Second, in this context of unequal risk and circulation access, the storyteller's displacement from her own story of displacement poses the greatest challenge to grounding our project in research as academic contribution *and* activist social justice. In essence, we are seeking to disrupt *doble desplazamiento*, double displacement. That is, when the storyteller becomes displaced from her own story of displacement.<sup>7</sup> We have to grapple with the reality in our case, that when an undergraduate student writes the workers' stories, the student author is often celebrated and receives an “A” grade. When a worker writes about his own story, however, he risks losing his job and in extreme cases, even being deported. He is not enrolled in any class and so a grade or other kind of academic recognition for his experience, perspective, and writing about it does not exist.

Through this process, we have come to realize and articulate three core pedagogical dispositions and practices.

1. First and foremost, we are writers writing. Undergraduate and faculty writers collaborate with maintenance worker writers. The undergraduates and faculty do this not in terms of social welfare, but in terms of bilateral collaboration on a writing project.
2. As students, faculty and workers, we come face-to-face, engage in a sustained prismatic gaze regarding ways that stereotypes and “worker invisibility” operate and how that impacts all of us as human beings.
3. We wrestle with a constant tension: What happens when two groups of students collaborate on a writing project about social justice and their writing gets inspected at the border between “undergraduates” and “workers” and between perceptions of being a “real class” versus “NOT a real class”? How do we negotiate the fact that for the same piece of writing, the undergraduate student receives an “A” grade, and the worker risks being fired? This is the **political economy of rhetorical mobility** our writing class seeks to name and disrupt.



Fig. 6. Mario Osorio and Bianca Padro in a peer review revision workshop. Photo by Ryan Catalani.

## PROYECTO CARRITO: FROM ONE VAN TO A 50-VAN CARAVAN

However, I think that all of this anti-immigrant movement has a lot to do with the education our children receive in school. Thus, if I could change the world, I would revise the educational system to adapt to the era in which we are living. If we adapt to technological advances day by day, why not also adapt to the reality of immigration that is a core part of our country's economic, social, political and cultural life force? (“WE CAN(T)? LIVE IN HARMONY? 1)

We realized that for our stories to truly be seen, we have to overcome core rhetorical blockages. Immigration and immigrant rights, including the Dream Act and other issues of access to resources regardless of documentation, are a daily part of the United States media, politics, and school systems. Audiences not intimately affected by these issues are likely to have become saturated by this subject and begin to tune it out. Also, the workers make risks by publically sharing their stories and revealing that they have spent work time they are supposed to be cleaning, doing so. Finally, there is the issue of labor invisibility among some students, faculty, and staff in the same campus community. We knew we had to not only write about our work differently. We also had to inspire audiences to engage with our writing differently, too. It is in this spirit and rhetorical conditions that *Proyecto Carrito* was born. Our goal is to put into writing and rhetorical mobility what Mario describes here.

I would try to implement new curriculum whose purpose would be to give young people all the tools they need to survive in harmony and *compañerismo*, solidarity, in their community, independent of their nationalities. In this way, our educational system could inculcate respect for human life by granting more respect to parents' ability and rights to educate their children.

I think it is important for people to understand that we, the immigrants, are not the enemy. It is our own mind that, through history, has been manipulated with false information, making us seem like the reason why everything goes wrong in this country. However, certain studies confirmed by experts in the field of immigration policy show that immigrants contribute in a positive way to our society. It is important to change those myths that have no proof, that overshadow the spirit of the people who contribute to this country. This is a country that was built by immigrants. This is where we see the connection that it has with the education that we receive in our schools, because the children of we, the immigrants, are American, just like everyone else. (*Conference 2*)

In our effort to inspire people to read our words and engage with our stories, perspectives, and proposals for a more inclusive twenty first-century education, we knew we had to move our stories outside of the realm of traditional academic rhetoric where our submissions were being rejected or where our publications inspired fleeting attention. These traditional rhetorical spaces included the school newspaper and other publications, course syllabi and readings, and even academic articles. We decided we needed to disrupt worker invisibility by literally keeping the storyteller with her own story. We also decided we needed, literally, to drive our own narrative. So, we decided to wrap

a car, from roof to rim with texts we curated from the 500 written word, image, sound, and video documents we had produced over the last several years. Just weeks before we were due to appear at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, one of the workers in our class, Ramiro Soto, offered to donate his family's mini-van for our project. Then, eight of us—faculty, students and workers—drove 1,800 miles across country from Boston to Indianapolis to and from the conference in this van-text.

## PROYECTO CARRITO



### A TRANSLINGUAL INTERGENERATIONAL EXHIBIT BOSTON SPRING 2013

Fig. 7. Initial render for Proyecto Carrito by Michael Sepenoski

Our *Carrito* is a text. Our *Carrito* is also our mechanism of circulation. The car is also a literal representation of mobility. Many workers crossed the U.S. border hidden in trunks of cars. So, the car becomes a textual elephant in the room. Not just figuratively, but literally. It is an aesthetic and three-dimensional spatial form of disruption of the ways that the workers' writing and their identities as writers circulate at Emerson College. We also wanted to literally embody (by traveling in a van) the idea of a storyteller crossing borders—in this case institutional and academic conference borders—with their stories.

We decided that the text we curated on the van would focus on a theme of both immigrant struggles with education and also resilience. To frame the tone and theme of our van text, we published Mario's story on one of the doors:

The reason why I decided to immigrate to the United States was to give my family and myself a better future, and thanks to this decision, today my family has food on the table. And that makes me feel proud that I made the right decision. I think I am like any other immigrant,

an example of sacrifice and courage because it is very hard to leave behind everything you love: your family, friends, some of us leave wives and kids, friends and family members that many times we will never see again, because for different situations, they die in our absence, and even knowing that we can lose our own lives in the journey, it all requires a lot of valor knowing that we come to an unfamiliar country with a different culture and no one to give you a friendly hand. But thanks to God, I can say it was worth it. (Students for Rhetorical Mobility)

The workers also wanted to be sure the tone we included was one of joy and even love. Tone has become a dominant theme in our writing workshops in which the immigrants insist they want to tell their hard stories of suffering with love and that love is part of the perspective they wish to express. When I ask them what they mean by “love” in this context, Maria Portillo wrote this, which we also published on the van:

What I think I brought with me was the joy of knowing that I would be able to give a better future to my three children who I had left when I came here. I also brought with me pain, knowing that I had left my mother, to whom I thought I would say a final goodbye to because I knew I would never be able to see again. It was a big decision to make. One, I could stay where I lived or starve. Or two, I could also die on the road. It was a nightmare that journey, but nevertheless a journey of triumph that was worth taking. Regarding my story, I would say that the most important thing in life is not what or how much you have suffered ... but what you do and what you can still do. (Students for Rhetorical Mobility)

The undergraduates also wanted to emphasize that the workers are their teachers by writing what they have learned from them in the process of our class. One student wrote:

And that is what you have taught me. The stories of your lives are an inspiration. They have made me see that neither the language I speak, nor a document in my hands make me the citizen of a country. It is the humanity, the efforts, the *ganas*, the humility and the sacrifices that make you a citizen. That they give you the right of sharing the soul of this country and the values that it was founded on. (Students for Rhetorical Mobility)

Finally, we published on the van large photographs of ourselves as community and as writers. So when we piled out of the van, passersby and audiences would connect the stories we published on the van with us as the storytellers.

As our project evolves and we drive our *Carrito* to other conferences and exhibitions and school presentations to which we have been invited through the United States, we are coming to realize that the way journalists and students are writing about Proyecto Carrito is also different from traditional journalistic and academic practices. Our most recent surprise was that Proyecto Carrito is now circulating transnationally. In July 2014, Tamera and Ryan Catalani were teaching a translingual writing class in Medellín, Colombia at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. The second week of class, a man appeared in the doorway of the classroom. It turns out his daughter was a student at the Nacional and she had told him about the class where Tamera had shared the video about Proyecto Carrito at the 4Cs conference. This man, who introduced himself to us as Señor Rodrigo Zuluaga Jiménez, told us he was immediately inspired by it because he drives a taxi with a concept he created

called: “Taxi de la Felicidad” or “Taxi of Happiness.”<sup>8</sup> He created this as a way to build moments of happiness into everyday interactions between people in his city of Medellín that had, in 1992, once been considered the most dangerous city in the world, based on the number of homicides per year.



Fig. 8. Workers and undergraduate writers in Students for Rhetorical Mobility class map out our 1,800-mile route to and from the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Photo by Ryan Catalani.

asked if he might make his own Proyecto Carrito with the taxi he drives in Medellín. He also asked if he could ask the small fleet of taxi drivers he works with if they also want to wrap their vans with Proyecto Carrito-like messages. Specifically, Zuluaga Jiménez asked to reprint our Proyecto Carrito poster on *his* taxi, in a public show of transnational solidarity. He also wanted to wrap his taxi, roof to rim, with his own ideas about why his Taxi of Happiness concept is important to him in the context of his city where people live through violence. To this end, he also asked to include what some of his customers have written in the comment books he carries in his car at all times. Zuluaga Jiménez described his proposal in this way:

In solidarity with Proyecto Carrito, which I see as in solidarity with my Taxi of Happiness, happiness is revolutionary, too. Daring to be happy, even in the most brutal and violent circumstances is sometimes the best way to get people to see you as a person and then help you do what you need to do. We do not just suffer from a crisis of poverty or violence. We suffer from a crisis of perspective. (Personal interview)

In the span of three weeks since we returned from presenting at the 4Cs conference, young people, mostly students, have published more than six articles about us. Our audience has expanded outside the academic academy and includes Kevin, who owns *We Wrap Boston*, the commercial company that wraps logos for companies on buses, cars and trains. Considering this business name in another context—a rhetorical re-vision of the stories we tell and circulate throughout the streets

Tamera invited him to come tell our class about his work and what he thought of Proyecto Carrito. He opened his bag and pulled out a full-color picture of our van. He had found this image on our website, printed it out and laminated it. He now carries the image with him everywhere.

Zuluaga Jiménez

of Boston about immigration and education—could be a very powerful shift in the political climate.



Fig. 9. The founder of Taxis de La Felicidad, Rodrigo Zuluaga Jiménez, is in the blue shirt holding up the color picture of the van. Photo by Ryan Catalani.

These articles are in the form of multi-media online mixes of written word, video, photograph, and sound. More than once, actually publishing their articles in these forms required them to seek editors' permission to override the traditional rhetorical structure in which their respective publications had been designed. Probably our most innovative form of publication design and circulation has been a series of tweets that an

Emerson professor, Angela Cooke-Jackson, published in real-time as Tamera was giving a presentation of *Proyecto Carrito* in her classroom. Ryan Catalani, a few minutes after serendipitously seeing the tweets about the talk he did not know was happening, curated the tweets in combination with images and video he possessed in his own archive. Ryan then published his curated series in a new online multi-media story form called Storify.



Fig. 10. Video of Kevin Bergin, as he wraps the van with text and images, reflecting on why he believes the Proyecto Carrito is important. Video by Ryan Catalani. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dy2bB2UEX1w>



Fig. 11. The Storify series of curated tweets and images and the complete video of Mario's 4Cs speech circulated in dozens of classrooms at Emerson, all within days. By Ryan Catalani. <https://storify.com/ryancatalani/markotamera-at-drcookejackson-s-health-and-narrati>



Fig. 12. Video of Mario's Speech (the point of this Proyecto Carrito journey). Video by Ryan Catalani. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACboL6UZxLE>

What remains to be seen is the final result of all of this. Will writing in this new way and asking readers to engage with our texts in a new way translate into genuine change that helps create more equitable material conditions and social and institutional status between students, faculty, staff, and workers all at the same College and in the same city? So far, what Proyecto Carrito has accomplished, itself possible because of nearly five years of community forged from our community writing class with undergraduate and worker students, is a series of packaged texts that we can show to administrators and others. This, in turn, helps us inspire people to include these same undergraduate, faculty and, most innovatively, janitorial workers at the table. By this, we mean that members of the janitorial staff who are part of Proyecto Carrito are now on committees regarding Human Resources,

Admissions, and making Emerson College a Dream School. This, it seems to us, is a major step toward creating campus conditions to build a more equitable campus. To embrace as a College the



Fig. 13. Behind the scenes short documenting Proyecto Carrito. Video by Ryan Catalani. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8uk\\_IxhBLk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8uk_IxhBLk)

objective of working for immigrant rights requires not only engaging in the admission and retention of immigrant students. It also requires listening to and enabling the dreams of the immigrants who have been working and living among us in the same campus for decades.



Fig. 14. Movement in support of the Dream Act. Tremont Street in downtown Boston, a few blocks away from Emerson College. Photo by Tamera Marko.

## COMPOSITION, RHETORICAL ACTIVISM AND INSTITUTIONS

Through Proyecto Carrito, we seek to circulate our stories to strategic target audiences through what Tamera calls *rhetorical inflection points*. That is, places where dominant narratives about anti- and pro-immigration and education happen. Proyecto Carrito then seeks for the circulation of our stories and our story tellers and our audiences to engage in a strategic intervention in this rhetorical flow in specific spaces: academia, activist rallies in the community, online venues, and, literally, on the road. We have received dozens of phone calls and emails asking about how we did Proyecto Carrito. So, now we are in the process of creating an advisory board that consists of workers, undergraduates, faculty, and administrators to create a call for applications from schools and other institutions who want to make their own Proyecto Carrito. In February 2015, we will publish a call for applications for schools, institutions, and groups nationwide to apply to make a Proyecto Carrito and join our 50-Van Caravan. In 2016, we will drive this caravan from Boston, across the country and then cross the Tijuana-San Diego border. The theme of this Caravan of cars-as-text is possibilities for immigration and inclusion in twenty-first-century education in the United States. To participate, there are only two requirements: (1) Each group must apply, explaining how they plan to collaborate with immigrant workers, young people, and elders in their institution to write the texts for their Carrito. In schools, this will most likely mean a collaboration between janitors, students, teachers, and administrators. (2) Before they wrap their vehicle with their texts, they must submit to our board their final design. If we approve the final design, then they become part of our Caravan.

We believe that perhaps of all the academic disciplines in the U.S. academy, Composition, Writing Studies and Rhetoric have the most potential to ally and partner with Mario's description of a more inclusive and accurate twenty-first-century education. This is because these disciplines work with undergraduates who, in this moment, have a lot of power inside their respective colleges and universities. It is because composition and rhetoric studies have a history of fighting to include students from diverse backgrounds, and many programs emphasize teaching students how to write their way into power, academic or otherwise. There are powerful parallels between this and what John Trimbur and others refer to as "the birth of Modern Composition" in the 1960s, when in 1969 Black and Puerto Rican students shut down the campus of CUNY City College and issued these demands:

1. An admissions policy that would guarantee that the first year class at City College reflected the racial composition of NYC public high school graduates;
2. A separate first year orientation program for Black and Puerto Rican students;
3. A student voice in governance, and in hiring and firing faculty in the SEEK Program;
4. Immediate establishment of Black and Puerto Rican Studies to be housed in an autonomous School of Third World Studies, and;
5. Requiring all education majors to study the Spanish language and to take courses in Black and Puerto Rican history (Trimbur 4-5).

As Trimbur's work points out, it was in this above context that what he calls the birth of modern composition happened. That is, many faculty members teaching composition and writing in general had to begin grappling seriously with what meaningful writing from diverse populations looks like and how to incorporate more voices, including those in writing, into the university contexts. On one hand, the fact that our Proyecto Carrito was welcomed in writing studies in Emerson College's First Year Writing Program reveals an openness to this kind of inclusiveness. On the other hand, the fact that we had to work so hard to come together as writers and have to focus on what inclusion of the workers as writers might look like and why it is important for twenty first-century education, reveals how far we still are from reaching some of those 1960s Open University proposals for more inclusion.

We find it striking that the content of Mario's talk at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in March 2014 resonates so strongly (in terms of inclusion of those of other races, countries, and languages within the educational system) with what students spoke about at CUNY City College in New York in 1969, nearly half a century ago. Our approach to circulating our ideas, however, is much different than that of the CUNY context. The CUNY students organized a public protest and took over an administrative building. Proyecto Carrito chose to use public performance art at a National Conference as a form of protest and proposal. We did not seek to disrupt the conference, but rather, to be an integral part of it. To do so we did find we had to temporarily "take over" some parking spaces in the four-star conference hotel parking lot where we brought a group of faculty and student audience members for a few hours of a scheduled panel discussion. This was only so we could keep the van (the story-text) with the speaker (the story teller). Being in the presence of the van and not just seeing photos or a video of it was, we believed, essential to a deeper audience understanding of what we were saying and doing. What Proyecto Carrito members believe is at stake is also similar to what the CUNY students might have argued. As Mario said in his talk at this 2014 National Conference:

All of our children will be the future mayors, governors, congressmen and women of our country. If they are not intellectually prepared with the education they received to face the future challenges of our country, then the United States would not move forward.

This is why I think we should change the education system by implementing new subjects that give our children a more responsible way of understanding the reason why people immigrate.

They should be taught the truth in a dignified and respectful way, so they can better understand the *convivencia* between people of all nationalities, and the importance of diversity for the growth of this country.

We need to recover our humanity that for the moment we have lost.

In conclusion, I want to say that we have the power to change the world, our country, our cities, our neighborhoods. But first, we need to change our minds. (*Conference 2*)



Fig. 15. Mario Osorio in our Students for Rhetorical Mobility class after delivering his first practice of the talk he gave at the Conference for College Composition and Communication in Indianapolis. Photo by Ryan Catalani.



Fig. 16. Sandrayati Fay, an undergraduate in our Students for Rhetorical Mobility class and the songwriter and singer who wrote the original music for our Proyecto Carrito videos, “blesses” our van with joy minutes before we begin our 1,800-mile round trip journey to the Conference for College Composition and Communication. Photo by Ryan Catalani.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>“WE CAN(T)? LIVE IN HARMONY?” 1.

<sup>2</sup> This class is supported by the following entities at Emerson College: the First Year Writing Program, the Facilities Management Department, the Department of Writing, Literature and Publishing, the Office of Service Learning and Community Action, the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, the Elma Lewis Center for Civic Engagement, and the Office of the Dean for the School of the Arts. We wish to give a special note of gratitude to two people at Emerson College, who in the last two years since they have come to this College, have especially facilitated Proyecto Carrito to soar: Dr. Sylvia Spears, Vice President for the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, and Emerson College President Dr. Lee Pelton.

<sup>3</sup>The Alabama state legislature passed a controversial new immigration bill on June 9, 2011 that requires public schools to check students’ immigration status, criminalizes giving an undocumented immigrant a ride, requires employers to use E-Verify to check potential employees’ status, and instructs police to check the immigration status of anyone they stop if they suspect the person of being an undocumented immigrant. See full Act in State of Alabama.

<sup>4</sup>In Spanish, the masculine term is used when there is one man present in any group of people. This is true regardless of whether there are 100 men and one woman or 1,000 women and one man. Yet, the “o” in “Latino” literally only refers to men, as in mankind instead of humankind. To include both women and men in the word “Latino,” we use the now commonly used term among academics, journalists and activists: Latin@. (This “@” denotes both women and men).

<sup>5</sup> This project is called Proyecto Boston Medellín (PBM). Tamera choreographs transnational collaborations among writers in her classes at Emerson College, Duke University, the Punahoe School in Honolulu and the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in Medellín doing the kinds of translingual writing necessary for storytellers to cross borders with their stories to engage in person with diverse audiences. PBM focuses on working with story tellers, primarily artists and community leaders, who have the least access to cross borders but who, through their lived experience and education, have the most to teach us about some of our most pressing twenty-first-century local and global crises and possible solutions to them. See <http://mobility17.com/pbm/pbmd-2013/> and <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B6jG7cKdVAGeCHFUYVM5bzAtN2tGU3k2b01nbTRzUURoMT hF/view?usp=sharing>.

<sup>6</sup>For her specific community art projects and her work with Proyecto Carrito specifically, see her portfolio <http://www.mariaceciliacardona.me/>.

<sup>7</sup> I have written about this theory of *double displacement* elsewhere. See Marko, “Doble Desplazamiento” and Marko, “We Too Built The City of Medellín.” This article about Proyecto Carrito is the first time I link the immigrant workers from Latin America in the United States as part of this *doble desplazamiento* spectrum.

<sup>8</sup> For more about Rodrigo Zuluaga Jiménez’s “Taxi de la Felicidad,” see the following video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4---ApAM6k>

## WORKS CITED

- Amarillismo Positivo: Taxis De La Felicidad*. TeleMedellin, 2014. *Youtube.com*, n.d. Web. 17 Feb. 2015. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4--ApAM6k>>.
- Catalani, Ryan. "@MarkoTamera at @DrCookJackson's health and narrative class." *Storify.com*, n.d. Web. 3 Dec. 2014. <<https://storify.com/ryancatalani/markotamera-at-drcookejackson-s-health-and-narrati>>.
- Cardona Gaviria, Maria Cecilia. "MARIA CECILIA CARDOVA." *Portfolio* n.p., n.d. Web. 18 Feb. 2015. <<http://www.mariaceciliacardona.me>>.
- "Demonizando Los Inmigrantes." *El Planeta: Boston's Latino Daily*. 14-20 Oct. 2011: 1-5. Print.
- Horner, Bruce, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur. "Opinion: Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach." *College English* 73.3 (Jan. 2011): 303-21. Print.
- Lorenzano, Sandra. "Dialogue." *Photographic Correspondences: Marcel Brodsky Pablo Ortiz Monasterio*. Mexico City: Editorial RM, 2008. Print.
- Marko, Tamera. "Disrupting *Doble Desplazamiento* in Conflict Zones: Alternative Feminist Stories Cross the Colombia-U.S. Border." *Reflections: A Journal of Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing and Service Learning*. Spec. issue on *Public Rhetoric & Activist Documentary*. 12.1(Fall 2012): 9-53. Print.
- . "We Also Built the City of Medellín: *Desplazadas'* Family Albums As Feminist Archival Activism." *Taking Risks: Feminist Stories of Activist Research in the Americas*. Ed. Julie Shayne. New York: SUNY Press, 2014. 119-54. Print.
- Osorio, Mario Ernesto. "As Prepared for the 2014 Conference on College Composition and Communication. Delivered on March 20, 2014 at the J.W. Marriott, Indianapolis, Indiana." Video Transcript. Web. 25 Oct. 2014. <<http://mobility17.com/proyecto-carrito/donate/>>.
- . *English Conversation and Writing Class. January – May, 2011, Emerson College*. Ed. Tamera Marko. 2011. TS. Author's Private Collection. Print.
- . "WE CAN(T)? LIVE IN HARMONY: HB56. A Letter from Emerson College Immigrant Students." Opinion piece submitted to the Emerson College *Berkeley Beacon*. Nov. 9, 2011. TS. Author's Personal Collection. Print.
- Proyecto Carrito*. n.p, n.d. Web. 25 Oct. 2014. <<http://mobility17.com/proyecto-carrito/donate/>>.
- State of Alabama. Office of the Attorney General. *Alabama Immigration Law. (Act No. 2011-535)*. State of Alabama, n.d. Web. 25 Oct. 2014. <<http://www.ago.state.al.us/Page-Immigration-Act-No-2011-535-Text>>.
- Students for Rhetorical Mobility. *Proyecto Carrito*. 2014. Van Wrapped in Text. Curator: Ryan Catalani. Collection of Mobility17. Boston.
- Trimbur, John. "Viva Harlem U!: La Lucha Contra Esconder La Escritura De Las Masas: Open Admissions and the Birth of Modern Composition." Thomas R. Watson Conference. Louisville, KY. 19 Oct. 2012. Conference Presentation.
- Zuluaga Jiménez, Rodrigo. "Taller De La Escritura Translingual." Personal interview. 15 July 2014.

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

Christopher Wilkey Northern Kentucky University  
Daniel J. Cleary Lorain County Community College

## 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 econocide in solidarity with 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”)<sup>1</sup>

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 200 people have submitted cartoons, "balloons" voicing what they imagine the humanist-in-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.

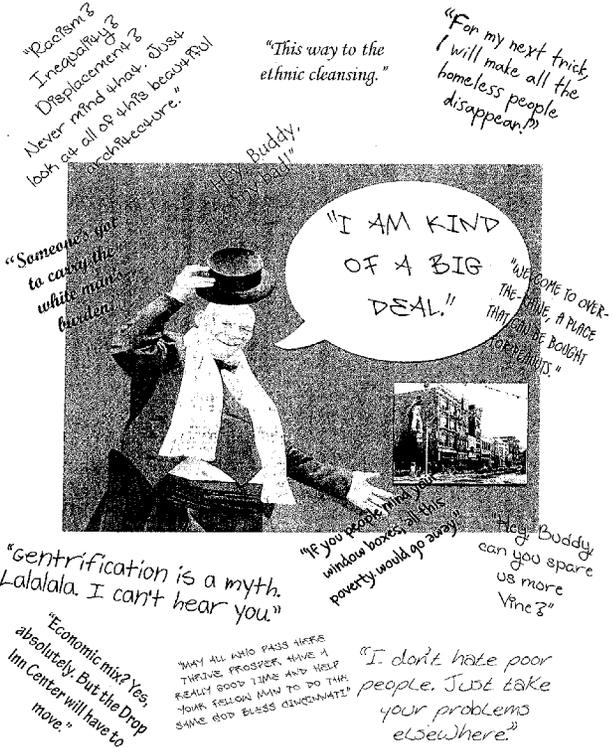


Fig. 4. StreetVibes.

## 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

<sup>1</sup> 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](http://arts.miamioh.edu/cce/tarbell_mural.html).

## WORKS CITED

- Appadurai, Arjun. *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*. Durham: Duke UP, 2006. Print. Public Planet.
- “ArtWorks Mural Public Response.” *The Miami University Center for Community Engagement in Over-the-Rhine*. Miami U, n.d. Web. 13 Jan. 2014.
- “Board of Directors.” *3CDC: Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation*. 3CDC, n.d. Web. 3 Jan. 2014.
- Deans, Thomas. *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition*. Urbana: NCTE, 2000. Print.
- Dreese, Donelle, Thomas A. Dutton, Bonnie Neumeier, and Christopher Wilkey. “A People’s History: Teaching an Urban Neighborhood as a Place of Social Empowerment.” *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* 19.1 (2008): 138-58. Print.
- Dutton, Thomas A. “Do You Have a Sign?” *Truthout*, 15 Jan. 2012. Web. 3 Jan. 2014.
- . “Indian Reservations, Trojan Horses, and Economic Mix.” *The Miami University Center for Community Engagement in Over-the-Rhine*. Miami U, 24 Mar. 2007. Web. 3 Jan. 2014.
- Flower, Linda. *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. 1975. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1995. Print.
- “Full Biography for James R. Tarbell.” *Smart Voter: League of Women Voters*. League of Women Voters of California Education Fund, 1999. Web. 18 Dec. 2014.
- Gaes, Gerald G. “The Impact of Prison Education Programs on Post-Release Outcomes.” Reentry Roundtable on Education. John Jay College of Criminal Justice. 31 Mar. 2008. Web. 3 Jan. 2014. PDF file.
- Gee, James Paul. “Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction.” *Journal of Education* 117.1 (1989): 5-17. Print.
- Gorgol, Laura E., and Brian A. Sponsler. “Unlocking Potential: Results of a National Survey of Postsecondary Education in State Prisons.” Washington: Institute for Higher Education Policy, May 2011. Web. 3 Jan. 2014.
- Hinkston, Nannie. *People’s Platform for Equality and Justice*. Cincinnati: Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless, 2011. Print.
- Mack, Nancy. “The Social Nature of Words: Voices, Dialogues, Quarrels.” *The Writing Instructor* 8.4 (1989): 157-65. Print.
- Morrison, Toni, and Angela Davis. “How Do We Become Whole Again . . . After Traumas that Threaten to Splinter Our Souls?: On Literacies, Libraries, and Liberation.” *The Liberator Magazine*, June 2011. Web. 15 Dec. 2013.
- Palmer, Shelby M. “Postsecondary Correctional Education: Recognizing and Overcoming Barriers to Success.” *Adult Learning* 23.4 (2012): 163-69. Print.
- Parks, Steve. “Opportunity Lost: Disciplinarity, Community Activism, and the Grand Compromise.” *Trans-Scripts: An Interdisciplinary Online Journal in the Humanities and Social Sciences at*

- UC Irvine 3* (2013): 202-10. Web. 5 Feb. 2014.
- Sheridan, Mike. "Cincinnati's 3CDC: A Model for Urban Transformation." *Urban Land*. Urban Land Institute, 28 Sept. 2011. Web. 3 Jan. 2014.
- Skirtz, Alice. *Econocide: Elimination of the Urban Poor*. Washington: NASW P, 2012. Print.
- Visions of Vine Street*. WCPO. Online Video. Original television broadcast. April 2001. Web. 5 Jan. 2014.
- Welch, Nancy. *Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2008. Print.
- "What is 'Agit-Prop?'" *The Miami University Center for Community Engagement in Over-the-Rhine*. Miami U, n.d. Web. 13 Jan. 2014.
- "Who We Are." *3CDC: Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation*. 3CDC, n.d. Web. 3 Jan. 2014.
- Wilkey, Christopher. "Engaging Community Literacy through the Rhetorical Work of a Social Movement." *Reflections: A Journal of Writing, Service-Learning, and Community Literacy* 9.1 (2009): 26-60. Print.
- Wilson, Anita. "Four Days and a Breakfast: Time, Space, and Literacy/ies in the Prison Community." *Spatializing Literacy Research and Practice*. Kevin M. Leander and Margaret Sheehy, eds. New York: Peter Lang, 2004. Print.
- Yonkings, Charles. "Lockdown (Segregation)." *Songs from Ohio Route 83: A Joint Chapbook from the Poets of Lorain Correctional Institution and Grafton Correctional Institution*. Self-published Poetry Chapbook. Westlake: Northeast Ohio Community Outreach Project (NEOCOP), 2013. Print.
- . "Norman Rockwell (in the Ghetto)." *Songs from Ohio Route 83: A Joint Chapbook from the Poets of Lorain Correctional Institution and Grafton Correctional Institution*. Self-published Poetry Chapbook. Westlake: Northeast Ohio Community Outreach Project (NEOCOP), 2013. Print.

# Cultivating Land-Based Literacies and Rhetorics

Gabriela Raquel Rios University of Central Florida

## KEYWORDS

embodied, farm workers, indigenous, labor, performance, teatro

In her recent article on the first Chicana organization, the *Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional* (CFMN), Kendall Leon argues for the need for more situated accounts of community rhetoric in order to account for practices or processes of affiliation deployed by marginalized communities that are not easily visible. In fact, Leon argues that Chicana, as a rhetorical identity, “emerges in response to a shared experience by Latin@s and/or Mexican@s of being treated as a-rhetorical” (2). In response to this challenge, Leon offers a methodology and heuristic that recognizes how marginalized folks produce rhetoric beyond a focus on “public texts”(2).

In my own experiences working with farm worker activists in Orlando, Florida, I find that farm workers, many of whom are Latin@ and/or Mexican@, have similarly deployed rhetorics in response to ideologies of literacy that construct them as a-rhetorical. These ideologies of literacy, farm workers argue, operate on a mentality that suggests learning to read and write—or learning to speak a language of power, particularly English or Spanish—will gain them upward mobility or help them become more efficient and effective organizers. Nevertheless, Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) organizer Gerardo Reyes argues that this traditional notion of literacy is not what “changes reality.” In fact, he and other farm workers contend that due to the transient nature of their labor, learning English is the last thing on the list of important needs (Personal interview).

In turning to the CIW, I aim not only to contribute to growing scholarship on situated accounts of community rhetoric in community literacy studies but also to show how the focus on land and environmental issues in farm worker activism contributes to place-based studies in environmental rhetorics. In doing so, I look beyond the notion of text entirely in order to better listen to and account for the arguments farm workers make about literacy and about how their labor and organizing practices are interconnected. I find that farm workers build a theory of social change through what I call land-based literacies and rhetorics. These literacies (acts of interpretation and communication) and rhetorics (organizational and community-building practices) ultimately build a theory that 1) recognizes the ways in which land can produce relations and 2) recognizes the value of embodied ways of knowing.

## FARM WORKER ORGANIZING IN FLORIDA: REFRAMING LITERACY

One of the primary areas of concern for many of the organizations we work with at the Youth and Young Adult Network of the National Farm Worker Ministry (YAYA) is labor rights. Farm worker labor organizing cuts across several issues implicated in “the new activism,” including but not limited to youth organizing, technology, literacy, immigration reform, and women’s rights and health issues. Farm work and domestic labor are the only two sectors of labor excluded from federal worker protection rights enjoyed by other workers.<sup>1</sup> They are also, tellingly, the two sectors of labor that constituted the earliest forms of legal slave labor and that arguably paved the way for modern-day capitalism.

I have been most involved in two campaigns: the CIW’s Fair Food Program (FFP), and FWF’s *Campesinos’ Gardens* (Farm Workers’ Gardens). For these organizations, changing reality begins with dignifying farm workers and farm work labor, often in opposition to traditional ideologies of literacy and literate activity. Many farm workers claim that the persistent privileging of traditional literacy devalues not only their knowledge as skilled laborers but also their ability to organize themselves and build movements for social change. Additionally, they argue that—however well-intentioned—promoting traditional literacy as a universal tool of empowerment can have a dehumanizing effect on farm workers, especially those who do not speak a dominant language of power like English or Spanish.

### *Farm Labor is Skilled Labor: Ideologies of Literacy, Race, and Labor*

The CIW is an internationally recognized grassroots organization made up of farm workers and allies (primarily college-aged youth). Since it formed in 1993, it has primarily worked to address labor abuses in farm work and agribusiness, including, in the most extreme cases, modern-day slavery.<sup>2</sup> The CIW operates like a union, and their FFP seeks to increase the wages of tomato farm workers in Florida and to instill a code of conduct for their labor that can ensure the protection of basic farm worker rights, such as access to restroom facilities and lunch breaks.<sup>3</sup> I attended the CIW’s 2013 Encuentro conference as a representative of the Youth and Young Adult Network of the National Farm Worker Ministry. Other YAYA members and I gathered with youth, academics, and other activists from all over the nation to attend sessions and workshops on organizing for the CIW’s campaign for fair food.

During one of our sessions on the history of the CIW’s campaign for fair food (also known as the “fair food movement”) and its accomplishments, Reyes articulated a critique of ideologies of literacy that highlights the ways in which literacy, race, labor, and ability are often bound together: “People think that because Indigenous or poor and uneducated people do this work, that the work lacks intellect or skill. People assume that ‘anyone’ can do this form of labor because ‘these people’ can. But, we have skill. Many of us are Indigenous, and we have grown up knowing how to work with the land” (Reyes, “History”). While, here, Reyes is linking literacy in the form of education to race, class, labor, and ability, he later went on to talk about more traditional forms of literacy and their

impact, arguing, “people think that because we do not know how to read or write, and because we cannot speak English or Spanish that we are ‘unskilled’ workers. But we are experts at what we do” (Reyes, “History”).

When Reyes made these remarks, he was speaking not only about the farm labor that farm workers perform, but also about the organizational and rhetorical labor that they accomplish. The knowledge for organizing, he explained, comes from farm labor and from the land. Reyes was acutely aware of his predominantly college student and academic audience in arguing for a kind of ally who respects the rhetorical skills that farm workers have gained from their labor and experiences, if not from formal education.

This wasn’t the first (nor would it be the last) time that I encountered farm workers bringing up ideological stances on traditional notions of literacy as they discussed the importance of their work. For example, FWF’s Campesinos’ Garden was developed as part of its commitment to food sovereignty for farm workers. FWF is a “multi-ethnic” organization that seeks to secure better working and living conditions for farm workers. During my first visit to the Fellsmere garden, coordinator Yolanda Gomez explained the importance of the garden for farm workers by juxtaposing it against traditional notions of literacy:

I used to always say that my kids needed to be educated and learn English so that they didn’t have to do this work because I think this is how we are always taught to think. But, you know, there is nothing wrong with this work. This work is beautiful and someone has to do it. This garden is not about fresh food—it’s a food movement. (Gomez)

For Gomez, the garden carries political weight: It stands as an argument, not only for farm worker rights to healthy food but also for the value of their labor and their knowledge *in opposition to* ideologies that undermine and devalue it in relation to literacy. Nevertheless, she argues, farm work is valuable knowledge work.

The reframing of literacy in these ways not only asks us to reconsider the ever-present “literacy myth” that literacy acquisition is a universal tool of empowerment (Graff, “Introduction”); it also asks us to consider the ways in which certain ideological stances to literacy are bound up in notions of race, labor, productivity, and even “humanity.” My own research is invested in critical literacy studies that stem from both rhetoric and composition (Rhet-Comp) and Indigenous studies. Several scholars in each discipline have worked to interrogate the relationships between and among literacy, class, education, and race. These scholars highlight the ways in which literacy as a social and cultural construct affects the material conditions of people’s everyday and civic lives (see, for example, Deborah Brandt and Catherine Prendergrast). Some of the most fruitful and enduring projects, such as Graff’s *Literacy Myth*, have taken an historical approach that accounts for contradictions between ideologies of progress and decline in literacy acquisition. In an article commemorating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Literacy Myth*, Graff reiterates that literacy acquisition “guaranteed neither success nor a rise from poverty,” particularly for African Americans, and at least partially located its power, resilience, and contradictoriness in the development of school systems and citizenship practices (“Literacy Myth at 30” 642).

More recently, in her examination of the role of literacy in the production of citizenship, Amy

Wan has also linked literacy to labor and productivity similarly to how the farm workers have through an examination of literacy training for immigrants seeking work in the U.S. during the 1920s. Her work shows how the public turn in higher education has made the English classroom (especially the rhetoric and composition classroom) a “citizen-making space,” and she challenges the uncritical uptake of citizenship as a heuristic in rhetoric and civic engagement and community literacy courses (174).

As community engagement or civic engagement learning becomes institutionalized, and as literacy practices in the classroom are implicated in these processes, we are met with the need and challenge to adapt a pedagogy *and curriculum* that can be aligned ideologically with communities materially affected by them. In other words, as universities desire to become more “public,” and as scholars want to make our work more public, we should consider how our community partners might affect the trajectory of our curriculum and pedagogy. Instead of assuming that our disciplinary standards define our commitment to communities, we might consider how our commitment to communities challenges our disciplinary norms.

Critical literacy studies in Latin American Indigenous studies advance a somewhat different agenda and historical trajectory than we do in rhetoric and composition studies, and I think this difference is important in a discussion of literacy and farm labor. Though in Rhet-Comp we tend to locate a link between *citizenship* and literacy (often as a relatively recent phenomenon), scholars in Indigenous studies locate that same link as one between *settler-colonialism* and literacy, citing a different historical trajectory and locus for understanding formations of literacy. For example, Walter D. Mignolo has argued that the spread of Western literacy (as alphabetic writing and European languages) was bound by a missionary, *colonial* agenda that constructed alphabetic literacy as sign of “true” civilization in a way that had never been done before but that persists into the present day (*Darker*). This is one of the primary logics used to rationalize the colonization of “savage” Indian nations. In this way, though Indigenous studies recognize that notions of literacy certainly do shift and change over time, these scholars see literacy as an enduring product and producer of ongoing colonialism. Additionally, they recognize the ways in which epistemic or discursive violence is connected to material violence.

## LAND-BASED LITERACIES AND RHETORICS

Place-based work in Rhet-Comp has discussed the importance of ecology or, more recently, of “ecological literacy” or “rhetorical ecologies” (Dobrin and Weisser; Goggin; Edbauer); however, Matthew Ortoleva compellingly argues that ecology has often been taken up in our field in a manner that is potentially problematic, given the tendency to talk about it as a metaphor. He cites a long history of ecological and environmental concern in our field, beginning with Kenneth Burke and moving on to Jenny Edbauer’s concept of “rhetorical ecologies.” Ultimately, he argues that the tendency to dematerialize discussions of ecology occurs most often in composition studies, and he proffers that exploring the relationship between ecomposition and ecological literacy can illuminate more fully the consequences that our literacy practices have on our ecological communities. According to

Ortoleva, “ecological literacy means understanding material and discursive relationships, and how these relationships are created, maintained, modified, solidified, and radically changed by acts of language” (66). Moreover, scholars like Thomas Rickert suggest that more work on place in rhetorical theory could further “ontological insights into the dissolution of the subject/object dichotomy and the vital role of the material environment in rhetorical practices” (42).

I argue that farm worker activism challenges us to consider what I call land-based literacies and rhetorics. I bring literacies and rhetorics together because I have found that farm worker literacies are deeply interwoven and in some ways synonymous with farm worker rhetorics. I use the “land” to shift the ontological presuppositions inherent in the term “ecology.” I am referring to an ontological position that sees humans as “the Earth being conscious of itself” (Cajete 61). This is an indigenous concept of relationality that is similar to the notion of ecologies—of networked relationships existing among various human and non-human objects—however, this indigenous concept relies on a relational ontology at the level of *kinship* quite literally. As such, land-based literacies are literal *acts* of interpretation and communication that grow out of active participation with land. While these are literacies that are predominantly extradiscursive, they are nevertheless rooted in relations among discursive phenomena (like communication) and ecology. Indigenous relationality recognizes that humans and the environment are in a relationship that is co-constituted and not just interdependent. Additionally, Indigenous relationality recognizes the environment’s capacity to *produce* relations.

The CIW and FWAf are influenced by Indigenous creeds and principles in their organizing practices that, I argue, contribute to their theory of social change. For example, the CIW draws on the Zapatista model of organizing, citing its non-hierarchical structure and attention to environmental concerns as direct influences on their own organizational frame. FWAf’s Campesinos’ Garden campaign locates exigence for the garden partly in terms of environmental racism and the notion of food sovereignty, which is a concept influenced by Indigenous environmental movements. Indigeneity is also often invoked as a trope of argumentation for both the CIW and FWAf, who value farm worker labor in terms of Indigenous relationality.<sup>4</sup>

Reyes has argued that the land *and* working with the land has taught him and other members of the CIW how to organize and build coalitions. During our final session at Encuentro last September, we were all encouraged to act out physically or create a gesture that could represent or symbolize our commitment to the farm worker movement. Reyes began by making the gesture of hoeing. He said that when you are hoeing the ground to plant a seed, you have to loosen the earth and bring it toward you. Doing this enlivens and conjures up diverse kinds of sediments and mixes them all together. But after you have planted the seed, you have to replace the earth you dug up—put it back in its place. This, he said, serves as a metaphor for how the CIW organizes itself in relation to community: “it’s not about doing work that benefits only you,” he cautioned. “It’s about being able to connect with others for the benefit of us all” (Reyes, Closing remarks). This act of creating community, he argued, is how change happens.

Though Reyes calls this performative act of labor a metaphor, it is also indicative of literal and material ways in which Indigenous land-based literacies and rhetorics function, as “the Earth being conscious of itself,” as previously mentioned. I want to stress, however, that Reyes is not “reading

the soil” here; instead, he is performing an act of relationality with the environment that is in turn teaching him about his own relation to other people. Indigenous scholar Gregory Cajete writes, “Native science [read: knowledge] acts to mediate between the human community and the larger natural community upon which humans depend for life and meaning . . . through this way of participation, Indigenous peoples receive gifts of information from nature” (20-21). Through this act of interpretation and communication—of literacy—he is building a rhetoric of creating and sustaining partnerships that is communal, embodied, and land-based. *This* practice, Reyes claims, is the central rhetorical force guiding the CIW’s efforts and *successes* in changing reality for farm workers (Reyes, Personal interview).

This orientation to relationality resists the subject/object dichotomy and the mind/body dichotomy as well. It suggests that humans and the environment are *always-already* co-constituted. This ontological premise is therefore unlike theories of environmental rhetoric that often presuppose a separation between humans and nature that must be bridged through identification (Burke). Rather, an Indigenous relational ontology recognizes the environment as a relative, and it argues for nature as a primary force in the creation of relations. In short, land-based rhetorics recognize the ways in which nature can *produce* relations. Therefore, when I refer to land-based literacies, I am invoking a relationship between land and bodies that produces knowledge, and that knowledge provides a “context in which process, product, and self might become one” (Cajete 47). One implication of land-based rhetorics, then, is the valuing of embodied ways of knowing/being derived from land and from with working/living/being with land.

### *The Archive and the Repertoire*

Though, as Rickert argues, the dichotomous philosophy that would separate environment/human/mind persists in rhetorical theory, Indigenous philosophies and rhetorics have always resisted such dichotomies. Scholars of Indigenous philosophy like Vine Deloria have argued against the subject/object split, and have also argued, “American Indians hold their land—places—as having the highest possible meaning” (75). One way that meaning is produced in relation to land is through embodied ways of knowing, such as dance, theatre or, as Reyes has noted, laboring on/with the land.

Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor argues that the colonial construction of an oral/literate binary that has plagued much of literacy studies can be more accurately understood as an archive/repertoire binary (16). According to Taylor, the archive consists of the written and other textual methods of transmission by which Western epistemologies are always *valued* and “preserved” in tangible, material ways; while the repertoire is revealed through the embodied practices by which Indigenous peoples transmit cultural memory and knowledge. Indigenous peoples’ performances and embodied practices before and during the colonial period (and now) reveal that Indigenous groups “admitted to no ontological distinction between human and non-human creation,” that “Nature was ritualized just as ritual was naturalized” (38). As a part of farm worker organizing, teatro campesino has always had Indigenous roots, specifically Mayan and Mexican (“Aztec”). In the following section, I will show how the CIW has used teatro to archive and tell history in order to recruit *and* educate new allies.

## EDUCACIÓN POPULAR: CIW TEATRO CAMPESINO

The majority of the farm worker organizations we partner with at YAYA utilize what is known as *Educación Popular* (Popular Education) in their organizing practices.<sup>5</sup> *Educación Popular* is a popular form of education that is also a form of organizing in Latin America. It functions as a deliberately political form of education, and it utilizes forms and practices that are rooted in people's everyday ways of knowing. *Teatro* allows farm workers to connect with each other in a way that recognizes the humanity and dignity of all workers by "meeting them where they are at" (Reyes, Personal interview). *Teatro* operates much differently from ideologies of literacy that Reyes argues function on a logic that tells farm workers who they are doesn't matter.

Farm workers use *teatro* as a method of communicating, analyzing, organizing, and persuading/recruiting. Reyes explains that in the CIW, farm workers often come together and act out the issues they see happening on the farms. These activities become a way to form an analysis and an understanding for how to change reality (Reyes, Personal interview). Additionally, this same method is used to teach other farm workers about the history of the CIW and to recruit more farm workers into the coalition by teaching them about the issues that other farm workers have faced and how the coalition has worked to change the reality that farm workers endure in the fields. Here, we see how *teatro* is used in two ways that are interconnected: it is used to form an analysis and understanding of what is happening on farms and then also to teach and recruit other farm workers and allies to the CIW movement.

### *Acts of Transfer*

Taylor argues that (contradictory) colonial discourses both denied the epistemic quality of embodied performance and simultaneously denounced the practices because they produced idolatrous and dangerous "content" (33). This paradox is sustained by a logocentrism that is implicit even in emerging performance studies in rhetoric, where Taylor argues that the "scene" of writing or the "performativity" of discourses reduces extradiscursive phenomena to text. This same logocentrism is what Malea Powell has argued sustains a "textual fetishization" that turns non-discursive objects into text (Agnew et al. 122).

In part, this dilemma is reflected in the nature of disciplinary language we have taken up, namely *performance* and *performativity*. As a noun, "performance" cannot capture the immediacy and theatricality of an event. Though theorists like Judith Butler have coined the phrase "performativity" in order to account for language acts and processes, Taylor argues the tendency to render performativity as a quality of discourse moves it away from performance. Instead, Taylor opts for the English translation of the Spanish word for performance, *performatic*, to better capture the immediacy and theatricality of performance (6). Additionally, *performatic* offers a way to disrupt the "foundational dichotomies" between orality and writing Ortoleva notes, in that it offers a way to signal the "performatic, digital, and visual fields as separate from, though always embroiled with, the discursive one so privileged by Western logocentricism" (Taylor 6).

The relationship between the archive and the repertoire is not inherently binary: "[e]ven though

the relationship between the archive and the repertoire is not by definition agonistic or oppositional, written documents have repeatedly announced the disappearance of the performance practices involved in mnemonic transmission” (Taylor 36). Taylor questions the political implications of such a “violent” relationship between the two. If the repertoire—embodied practices and performances—is purely ephemeral and sub par, and if Western archives are truly “static,” whose memories disappear (36)? Moreover, in privileging or pushing for traditional literacy in community literacy or rhetoric and civic engagement methodologies or heuristics, whose knowledge and meaning-making practices are we disappearing?

It is important to note that, despite the colonial logic of erasure, here, Indigenous memory and knowledge have continued through embodied ways of knowing like teatro campesino (farm workers’ theater)—through literal acts of interpretation of communication that are also epistemological. These acts, however, are contingent upon experiences with the land that ultimately form and grow knowledge that is encoded in and transmitted through the body. In order to account for acts of transfer, Taylor turns to the “scenario.” The scenario is a paradigm that can account for the transfer of meaning without reducing the body to a text or a performance into a narrative: “there is also an advantage to looking at scenarios that are not reducible to narrative because they demand embodiment” (Taylor 55).

#### *Teatro is/as the History of the FFP*

The concept of performatic additionally disrupts the dichotomy between ontological and epistemological (is/as) affordances of embodied ways of knowing. While performances are certainly bracketed by their transitory nature, they nevertheless also carry epistemological weight when they are used to form critique or to construct or transmit knowledge. Each year at Encuentro, the CIW performs the “history” of the FFP, tracing it into the present day. The performance is both a way to inform new attendees about the founding of the CIW and the Fair Food Program and a way to recruit potential allies for the cause.

The play begins with a scene that depicts farm workers working in humane conditions—they have shade and water, and they are able to take breaks. They clock in and out of work, and they take home a paycheck that offers a living wage—this is present-day Immokalee. After setting this scene, however, the next scene opens with the juxtaposition of two events, one that occurred in 1996, when a farm worker was beaten for resting to take a drink of water and another that occurred just two years ago, in 2012, when a farm worker was beaten for defending himself against criticism of his work. Both men came to the CIW to file a police report. The original 1996 event spurred the formation of the FFP, but the more recent event reminds us that there is still work to be done. In the play, the two bloodied shirts worn by the farm workers stand as a symbol for why the FFP is so important.

Here the tension of the is/as of performance is made manifest. As a literal performance, these scenes simply utilize symbolic structures to present a moment in time; however, as a critique of the ways in which farm worker labor is continually exploited, it also functions “as a critical lens, as a heuristic system” (Taylor 73). In bringing together two distinct moments in time, the scene not only marks a history of victory, given that the FFP has been successful in changing reality for some

farm workers, but also one of continued violence for others. Rather than functioning (strictly) as a narrative, this scenario, particularly when juxtaposed against the previous scenario, provokes an affective reaction that is simultaneously hopeful and dreadful. It is forward looking, even while it is looking backward to claim victory.

Given that the performance is a continual archiving and remaking of the history of the FFP, it also offers a very different orientation to history that is land-based (or spatial) rather than temporal. In other words, space, in this case, produces time rather than vice versa. This shift in logics, according to Vine Deloria, accounts for situated, material experiences that give rise to “symbols, doctrines, insights, and sequences” and, as we have seen, performances and relations (70). The “constant making and unmaking” of these relations through teatro each year at Encuentro “points to the active role of human beings in promoting the regenerative quality of the universe, of life,” even as it is expanded each year to account for what has happened in the previous year (Taylor 39). What’s more, while spectators are always-already implicated in the performance, the CIW’s relational practice of recruiting folks into the teatro each year adds another layer of spectator involvement and investment in the performance and, by extension, the cause. Spectators become active “players” in the movement, potentially even before they have ever had a chance to actually participate in it.

## IMPLICATIONS

In offering a situated account of CIW rhetoric, I have first shown how farm workers reframe literacy in order to account for the ways in which ideologies of literacy have been used to construct them as a-rhetorical. In order to account for their rhetorical agility, I have listened to how farm workers create a theory of social change through and with land-based literacies and rhetorics that recognizes the productive potential of nature and of embodied ways of knowing.

As Wan argues, much scholarship (and by extension classroom practice) in community literacy, rhetoric, and civic engagement has not been able to account for the contradictoriness of literacy as a universal tool of empowerment due to the uncritical uptake of citizenship production in these courses. What’s more, as Blake Scott has shown, models of corporate responsibility influencing service learning in rhetoric and civic engagement courses similarly should give us pause to consider what kinds of “citizens” we are producing in relation to literacy and civic engagement. If part of what farm workers want is for folks to *value* their forms of knowledge, and if, as Wan compels us, how we teach literacy matters, then we might start by incorporating farm worker (and other) critiques of literacy into our curricular design.

Additionally, we should think beyond our disciplinary norms to account for the repertoire of embodied meaning-making practices that the CIW argues is vital to creating and sustaining social change.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For example, the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which protects workers' rights to unionize and participate in collective bargaining, excludes farm workers. Additionally, even under the 1966 amendments to the Fair Labor Standards Act (which originally excluded farm workers), they do not receive the same protections guaranteed to workers in other sectors, namely the right to overtime pay and minimum wage in certain circumstances. What's more, the law allows children as young as 12 to legally work in the fields.

<sup>2</sup> "Modern-day slavery" is a term the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) use to refer to ongoing situations in which farm workers have been kept and forced to work against their will. Because of the complexity and breadth of this issue, I am unable to offer a detailed account of it in this article. However, I would like to highlight that to date, there have been nine cases of modern-day slavery brought to trial in the U.S., all of which have been discovered in Florida. In some of these cases, workers were brought into the country illegally; in other cases, workers have been homeless citizens of the U.S. and/or documented and undocumented migrant workers already in the States.

<sup>3</sup> The code of conduct can be found here: [http://ciw-online.org/fair-food program/](http://ciw-online.org/fair-food-program/).

<sup>4</sup> Because of how constructions of indigeneity circulate in official and unofficial discourses, it is difficult to offer a conclusive account of Indigenous farm workers. Not all Indigenous peoples openly identify as Indigenous. Some speak Indigenous languages, and some do not. Indigeneity is marked differently across space and within geopolitical frameworks. Additionally, there are diverse and unequal experiences of indigeneity among farm workers, and I do not mean to reduce that complexity here. However, I do wish to highlight how indigeneity has been a central organizing trope in the farm worker activism I have been a part of in Orlando.

<sup>5</sup> There are various histories and types of popular education, stemming from both Europe and North America. Here, I refer to the definition used by the CIW.

WORKS CITED

- Agnew, Lois, et al. "Octalog III: The Politics of Historiography." *Rhetoric Review* 30.2 (2011): 109-33. Print.
- Batalla, Guillermo Bonfil. *Mexico Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1996. Print.
- Brandt, Deborah. *Literacy in American Lives*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2001. Print.
- Burke, Kenneth. *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Los Angeles: U of California P, 1969. Print.
- Cajete, Gregory. *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. Santa Fe: Clear Light, 2000. Print.
- Deloria, Vine, Jr. *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*. 3rd ed. New York: Putnam, 2003. Print.
- Dobrin, Sydney I., and Christian R. Weisser. "Breaking Ground in Ecocomposition: Exploring Relationships between Discourse and Environment." *College English* 64.5 (2002): 566-89. Print.
- Edbauer, Jenny. "Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35.4 (2005): 5-24. Print.
- Goggin, Peter N., ed. *Environmental Rhetoric and Ecologies of Place*. New York: Routledge, 2013. Print. Routledge Studies in Rhetoric and Communication.
- Gomez, Yolanda. Historical background. Fellsmere Garden Event. Youth and Young Adult Network of the National Farm Worker Ministry. Fellsmere, FL. 3 Sept. 2013.
- Graff, Harvey J. "Introduction." *The Literacy Myth: Cultural Integration and Social Structure of the Nineteenth Century*. 1979. Brunswick: Transaction, 1991. Print.
- . "The Literacy Myth at 30." *Journal of Social History* 43.3 (2010): 635-61. Print.
- Leon, Kendall. "La Hermandad and Chicanas Organizing: The Community Rhetoric of the *Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional*." *Community Literacy Journal* 7.2 (2013): 1-20. Print.
- Mignolo, Walter D. *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2003. Print.
- Ortoleva, Matthew. "Let's Not Forget Ecological Literacy." *Literacy in Composition Studies* 1.2 (2013): 66-73. Web. 18 Feb. 2010.
- Prendergast, Catherine. *Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning After Brown v. Board of Education*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2003. Print.
- Reyes, Gerardo. "History of the CIW." *Encuentro 2013*. Coalition of Immokalee Workers. Immokalee, FL. 7 Sept. 2013. Conference presentation.
- . Closing Remarks. *Encuentro 2013*. Coalition of Immokalee Workers. Immokalee, FL. 8 Sept. 2013.
- . Personal interview. 18 Nov. 2013.
- Rickert, Thomas. *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2013. Print. Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture.
- Scott, J. Blake. "Civic Engagement as Risk Management and Public Relations: What the Pharmaceutical Industry Can Teach Us about Service-Learning." *College Composition and Communication* 61.2 (2009). 343-66. Print.
- Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. Print.
- Wan, Amy J. *Producing Good Citizens: Literacy Training in Anxious Times*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2014. Print. Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture.

# The Rhetorics of Race and Racism: Teaching Writing in an Age of Colorblindness

Deborah Mutnick Long Island University, Brooklyn

## KEYWORDS

rhetoric, race, racism, critical literacy, New Jim Crow

True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring (158).

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

**F**rom looming environmental catastrophe and relentless privatization of public space to extreme economic inequality, a multitude of contemporary issues underscores the need for a “new activist” movement and a corresponding political literacy. While there have been signs of a global political awakening in uprisings like the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street,<sup>1</sup> the current conjuncture of disarray on the left<sup>2</sup> and pervasive neoliberal policies of austerity and privatization tend to breed hopelessness, discouraging young people in particular from exploring radical ideas and possibilities that inspired previous generations, notably in the 1930s and 1960s. The mainly working class and first generation students I teach tend to be saddled with debt, anxious about the future, and driven by pervasive and uncertain market forces. For most, a college degree is a step toward a successful career and learning has rarely, if ever, been liberatory. In this essay, I show how analyzing the rhetorics of race and racism in the dominant narrative of American democracy alongside counternarratives of struggles for social and economic justice can engage students in “education as the practice of freedom.”<sup>3</sup>

I describe two classes—Pathways to Freedom and Writing in the Community (WiC)—in which students acquire rhetorical, writing, research, and analytical skills central to composition instruction. While themes in writing classes are typically viewed as incidental to these universal goals, I suggest that the study of history, together with an emphasis on critical discursive and rhetorical analysis, is also central to the development of the skills associated with composition. To pose a research question, evaluate a problem, develop an argument, or propose a solution, the writer must grasp the historical forces that shape a particular rhetorical discourse. At the same time, it is the rhetorical analysis of those discourses—actors, agency, motive, purpose, scene, and audience—that situates and complicates them. As Lloyd Bitzer theorizes, rhetorical discourse can be traced to the rhetorical

situation that gives rise to it, characterized by an exigency, “an imperfection marked by urgency . . . something waiting to be done . . . which is other than it should be” (6). To make sense of the text’s provenance and meanings, the reader must glean its contexts, locating them in time and space from multiple perspectives and sources, and engaging in historically specific, intertextual, critical analysis, akin to Freirean *conscientização*.

African American history is a particularly apt theme because it shines a bright light on the discrepancy between the nation’s democratic claims and its undemocratic practices. Even though, arguably, racial exploitation can only fully be understood in the context of class conflict, its inextricable entwinement in the process of capitalist expansion warrants emphasis on how colonial conquest and racism continue to haunt us. The exigencies of capitalist growth and black resistance pushed the nation to civil war in 1861 and then to rebellions in more than 160 cities in 1967 as civil rights laws proved incapable of remedying hundreds of years of racial oppression. By engaging in close reading of the discourses of American slavery and freedom, struggle and resistance, capitalism and democracy, students can begin to discern a key piece of the bigger puzzle of U.S. history in political and personal terms. Applying Bitzer’s theory of situated rhetorical discourse to an activist agenda, we might thus define “political literacy” as a critical response to exigent situations leading to actions aimed at changing reality.

## THEORY AND METHOD: BEHIND THE VEIL OF COLORBLIND IDEOLOGIES

Since 2011, I have been teaching in a first-year learning community called Pathways to Freedom that focuses on rhetorical analysis of African American history in Brooklyn, New York. The Pathways theme stems from my participation in Students and Faculty in the Archives (SAFA)—a project sponsored by the Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS)<sup>4</sup> to introduce first-year college students to archival research—as well as from my own lifelong commitment to fighting racism. My experience developing the Pathways curriculum, in turn, informed my design in fall 2013 of Writing in the Community, an upper division course in which students tutored teenagers in an alternative high school for youth offenders in conjunction with reading public sphere theory, essays on community literacy<sup>5</sup> and Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*.<sup>6</sup> Both classes use historical inquiry, rhetorical analysis, and metacognitive reflection—the ability to reflect on one’s own thought processes—to foster students’ ability to read “the word and the world” closely and critically, often revealing a gap, in this case, between their increasing knowledge of the history of racial oppression in the U.S. and their understanding of contemporary, racist social structures and practices.

Understanding the idea of the “veil” can help close that gap. The “veil” is a central concept in Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism in which the production of things conceals the exploitative process (e.g., cheap labor, inhumane working conditions) by which they are produced. W.E.B. Du Bois also uses the idea of the veil in writing about the problem of the color line to denote the lens of racial prejudice that keeps whites from recognizing black people’s humanity and creates a sense

of “twoness” or “double consciousness” (2) in African Americans. While most people today find racism morally repugnant, they also maintain that, despite some setbacks, we have made substantial progress in achieving racial equality. Though true in some respects, this uncritical faith in U.S. democracy serves to mask deeply unequal, oppressive conditions for masses of people. Gerald Horne lays out the historical basis for these persistent inequalities in his new, groundbreaking book about 1776, in which he argues that the colonists’ war against England was counterrevolutionary—not revolutionary—aimed at preserving the institution of slavery at a point of mounting black resistance and growing momentum in the British abolitionist movement. According to this analysis, rather than aberrations of democracy, U.S. slavery and racism constitute the very foundation of U.S. capitalism—brutal, racially coded, social relations of production behind the veil of “mirage democracy” (Zeese and Flowers).

Since the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the rise of post-racial ideologies, increasingly large numbers of people of color have been impoverished, incarcerated, and socially isolated in resegregated communities, schools, and prisons in what Alexander calls the “New Jim Crow.” Starting in the early 1970s with President Nixon’s State of the Union Address, a nascent post-racial ideology helped reframe racist practices and policies as wars on crime and drugs, orchestrated by a “New Federalism,” a return of power “back to the States and to the people of the United States” (21). This mystification of racism hinged on the idea that slavery and Jim Crow were anomalies in an otherwise admirable national history of expanding rights and freedoms. Thus in keeping with the national mythology that the death of the old Jim Crow was a triumph of American democracy, it became taboo to engage in publicly racist speech or behavior, leading to the concealment of racist policies in code words like “crime” and “safety.”

These discursive sleights of hand make white and black students alike susceptible to the ideology of colorblindness. I find that many students are shocked by gaining more detailed knowledge about slavery and Jim Crow yet disassociate themselves from contemporary forms of racism, expressing gratitude toward those who fought for civil rights and relief that they live in a period of relatively more equality and opportunity. Complicating such attitudes is the fact that in many respects the situations of individual African Americans, including those of many of my students, *are* better. Such complexities are difficult for anyone, much less college freshmen, to grasp. To do so entails analysis of the contradictory forces that dismantled Jim Crow and produced radical social change, on the one hand, yet gave rise to colorblind politics and *de facto* segregation, on the other. They need to exercise what James Paul Gee calls “powerful literacy,” a “meta-discourse to critique the primary discourse or other secondary discourses, including dominant discourses” (26). In other words, they need to learn to stand outside the discourses of post-racial America in order to explain the persistence of such inequities and recognize the exploitative political-economic structures that post-racial ideology conceals. Further, they need to support their analysis with evidence that accounts for the evolution of these discourses.

## ENACTING CRITICAL RHETORICAL ANALYSIS IN PATHWAYS TO FREEDOM

Pathways to Freedom links two or three sections of composition and history with a total of 40-60 students each year in a two-semester sequence roughly spanning the periods from the Revolutionary War to Reconstruction in the fall and the rise of Jim Crow to the 1960s in the spring. Students visit BHS to examine slave bills of sale in what was then called Breuckelen, analyzing eighteenth and nineteenth century transactions for a person whose name probably exists nowhere else in the annals of history in relation to the 1799 New York State Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery. Complementing these materials, among other texts, are Jefferson's draft of the Declaration of Independence, parts of his *Notes on Virginia*, and a paper by historian David Gellman about the tension between the New York State founding fathers' abolitionist sentiments and their stronger commitment to nation-building. We ask the students to analyze the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence and the 1799 Act in relation to slave bills of sale. To guide them, we assign parts of Bitzer's essay concentrating on his idea that exigent rhetorical situations give rise to rhetorical discourses that "function ultimately to produce action or change in the world" (4). Thus students begin to understand, for example, how the response of historical figures like John Jay to the exigencies of the 1790s gave rise to a specific discourse of "gradual abolition" in New York State that subordinated their moral condemnation of slavery to their reliance on slaveholders' support and their commitment to nation-building.

As students examine the divergence between the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence and the realities of U.S. history, they not only learn that slavery was fundamental to nation building but also begin to question the dominant narrative of American democracy and reflect on their own subject positions. For example, a student discovered George Washington's evolving view of slavery by researching his letter to financier Robert Morris. In the letter, Washington complains about a lawsuit filed by Philadelphia Quakers who sought to free a slave owned by a Mr. Dalby. Washington expresses sympathy for the plight of slaves—"there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of [slavery]"—but insists that the only proper authority for enacting change is the legislature and worries slaveholders would shun the city so as not to "hazard their property." Starting with this primary document, the student traces Washington's development from his early disparagement of blacks as "inferior and needless of rest" to his growing but mostly private sympathy for abolition. Through rhetorical analysis of the letter, she gains a critical perspective on who did what and why in history and deepens her understanding of complex personal and collective responses—including perhaps her own—to rhetorical situations.

In the second semester of Pathways, students study the rise of Jim Crow, the Great Migration, and the civil rights movement, examining Brooklyn Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) papers at BHS and conducting oral history interviews with local civil rights activists for the Brooklyn Civil Rights Oral History Collection.<sup>6</sup> They read Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*, which bridges the yearlong course of study with a short history of the African American diaspora, along with other texts, including Ann Petry's gripping story "In Darkness and Confusion" and an article by Brian

Purnell about Brooklyn CORE protests in the early 1960s. In *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright recalls the trauma of the Middle Passage and hundreds of years of captivity, and goes on to chronicle the everyday realities of black Southern sharecroppers under Jim Crow, their mass exodus to the urban North between 1890 and 1920, and the broken promises of northern city life that gave birth to the modern civil rights movement. Through his poetic chronicle of the African American experience, Wright underscores the contradiction between early white America's "rebellion against tyranny" and its utterly dehumanizing extraction of wealth from slave labor (12).

This conundrum of "democracy," properly understood, demands a dialectical explanation rooted in historical research of the sort the author of the paper on George Washington begins to pursue. By investigating Washington's perspective on slavery, both through her analysis of his writing and through secondary sources that contextualize the primary document, the student complicates popular myths about the "father of our country" and arrives at a portrait of him that is neither heroic nor contemptible but human, shaped by his times, worthy of legendary status and disappointing in his failure to oppose slavery, which he increasingly understood was morally wrong and lacked scientific or religious justification. It is the same move in a more sophisticated vein that Wright makes when he contrasts the "devastation and despair" (12) experienced by African Americans to the transatlantic rise of "a passionate, humanitarian belief in the rights of man" in the early eighteenth century, underscoring their capacity for hope and struggle and the complexity of their response to the brutal history of enslavement and exploitation despite which "*we* black tools responded as fervently as did the rest of mankind to the call of Liberty" (17).

Engaging in dialectical thinking remains a challenge for Pathways students as they are asked to draw connections between U.S. history and their own experiences in a period of unprecedented success for some African Americans and misery for masses of others trapped in cyclical poverty and the prison industrial system. Another challenge is the weakness—in some cases, absence—of the sort of public dialogue on these issues that a strong political left, capable of pushing back against neoliberal policies, might engender. In an effort to offset such challenges, we introduce students to new knowledge such as the iconic Woolworth's sit-ins that began in 1960 in Greensboro, North Carolina. While most of them already know something about the protest, learning how it spread to Brooklyn among other places helps them understand the scope and mass character of the movement. Next we might ask them to compare and contrast the overt racism of the Jim Crow era to current practices like restrictive voting bills and to reflect on how people in two different eras stand up and resist oppression. A third step, which I increasingly see as vital, is to guide students in a process of integrating their emotional responses to racism with their deepening political and historical knowledge. Last, we are finding that expanding the focus from African American to Native American and women's eighteenth and nineteenth century history enables students to link these narratives horizontally and vertically, across and beyond that period, and alleviates the stress of zeroing in unremittingly on black history.<sup>8</sup>

## ENACTING CRITICAL RHETORICAL ANALYSIS IN THE FIELD: THE TRANSITIONS PROJECT

In Writing in the Community (WiC), the advanced writing class I taught in fall 2013, students participated in the Transitions Project, for which they tutored teenagers remanded to a special high school for youth offenders. I assigned Alexander's book to help the students situate their experience working with youth offenders in the historical context of the New Jim Crow. Alexander directly addresses the problem of post-racial ideology of colorblindness in her searing indictment of the prison industrial system. She punctures the myth of a post-racial society with chilling data about the dramatic increase of America's prison population since 1980 from 300,000 to two million, observing that more black men are incarcerated today "than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began" (180).

She goes on to reinterpret American history as comprised of three periods of racial oppression and racialized control: slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration. The students found Alexander's critique of the criminal justice system profoundly disturbing, relating her analysis of the impact of the War on Drugs on poor, black communities to their experience working with youth who were responsive neither to their own program nor to our encouragement to reflect on their experience and learn to "talk back" productively to the school and wider communities. The teenagers' fierce resistance to authority, including us, involved verbal abuse, tantrums, physical scuffles with each other, and refusal to learn or cooperate, ultimately resulting in their administration asking us to discontinue our visits.<sup>9</sup> My students and I could see first hand the impact of incarceration, poverty, and racism on teenagers with multiple arrests, criminal records, and dreary future prospects.

In an essay titled "Catch 22: Literacy Education and the Public in Jefferson High School,"<sup>10</sup> one WiC student, Samantha, begins with an epigram by Tupac Shakur: "As real as it seems / the American dream ain't nothing but another calculated scheme / To get us locked up, shot up, back in chains / To deny us of the future / Rob our names / Kept my history, of mystery, but now I see / The American Dream wasn't meant for me." She describes the dramatic entrance of the most disruptive student to the classroom: "My gaydar flared immediately, followed by my sympathy: this girl must have it rough, a teenaged black lesbian already caught up in the justice system. The girl slammed her backpack onto a chair; it fell to the floor." With perfect pitch, Samantha captures the girl's gift for parody, her power, and her fragility: "You know what kind of school this is, right? You know we're..." She didn't break her fierce eye contact ... 'juvenile delinquents?' The other girls laughed. Nadia had asserted authority over me, challenged me, turned me into someone completely out of place."

Samantha recalls that the English teacher answered another student's question about relevance: "I'm sorry you don't like the essays but maybe you can see it as a life skill. Sometimes life gives us something we don't necessarily like, right? And we work with it as best we can." Interpreting these scenes "through the lens of education as a political act, incarceration as a political concept and the written word as a site for radical subversion," Samantha challenges the teacher's response to the student, concluding: "True revolutionary pedagogy, then, is more than teaching the right books or giving the right tests . . . [or] providing a public forum . . . for airing students' contributions to

national discussions. Revolutionary pedagogy requires a massive, multilateral shift in the social and political environment in which teachers work, day by day, to educate against all odds.” In an early draft of the paper, Samantha imagines what might have happened if the girls had shared each other’s writing, mostly autobiographical stories written in response to a prescribed nonfiction curricular unit. “One girl wrote about moving from Brooklyn to Senegal when she was five. Another wrote what was technically fiction but was obviously about her and her boyfriend navigating the shifting alliances of family members and school friends . . .” Samantha goes on to suggest that “discussing [the stories] in a forum designed as a rhetorical public . . . could have revealed an element of a community in crisis.”

Although Samantha came into the course with a commitment to social justice and prior exposure to critical education (she cites Freire, for example, whose writing I did not assign), her response to Alexander’s book and the Transitions Project resonated with that of her WiC classmates. More advanced than the Pathways students, WiC students were better able to link slavery and Jim Crow to the current era of “colorblind” ideology that obscures racist practices and policies and has led in many respects to far worse conditions for vast numbers of African Americans than existed in the 1960s. Although they appreciated Alexander’s analysis of mass incarceration, they did not always agree with her. Pointing to the complex, deracinating effects of poverty and racism that complicate such situations, students of color, in particular, questioned her critique of police surveillance of poor black neighborhoods, reminding us that many residents who feel under siege by local dealers and gangs welcome a police presence, and emphasizing the interplay between the rhetoric of race and crime and the reality of high crime rates in predominantly poor, nonwhite communities. As a whole WiC students were disappointed that Alexander’s call for a “radical restructuring of our approach to racial justice advocacy” (260) lacked discussion of alternatives to capitalism or explicit linkage of the prison industrial system to neoliberal policies such as privatization and public and corporate austerity programs that contribute to high unemployment rates, particularly among black men.

## LEARNING FROM SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: POLITICAL LITERACY, RESILIENCE AND THE "NEW ACTIVISM"

The belief that ghetto conditions were caused not by racial discrimination but by black pathology helped preserve the illusion of the North as a liberal sanctuary and spin the “classical narrative” of a triumphant civil rights movement. Through the study of Brooklyn history, including slave bills of sale and CORE flyers, pamphlets, and news clippings, Pathways students come to understand the civil rights movement as a “long” movement instead of a single victorious decade between *Brown v. Board of Education* and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. If we succeed in getting them to think critically about history, they also grasp what Jacquelyn Dowd Hall describes as the “conservative interregnum that, for good or ill, depending on one’s ideological persuasion, marks the beginning of another story, the story that surrounds us now” (1234). That narrative unfolded with the ascent of Black Nationalism, the reification of a black culture of poverty, and a rising black middle class—a post-racial story

purveyed by liberals in support of civil rights but afraid of radical black politics and by conservatives seeking reconsolidation ever since the turbulent New Deal politics of the 1930s.

One Pathways student who researched Operation Clean Sweep started her essay by noting that despite having been born and raised in Brooklyn, she knew little about the borough until her first year of college when she had “the chance to learn its history.” She learns that conditions in the 1960s were “horrific” and that Brooklyn CORE “decided to take on the task of improving living conditions because it highlighted the different ways racism was expressed in the North than it was in the South, which is what made this group so significant.” She proceeds to recount the main events of the anti-garbage campaign and to emphasize the politics of discrimination that led black residents to view unequal sanitation service as indicative of pervasive racism, while “Whites believed that the causes for the living conditions in Bedford Stuyvesant were due to the black population that lived there.” But for her classmates and her, the racism of the 1960s still belonged mainly to the past. She concludes, “The streets are much cleaner, discrimination is now over, and everyone has an equal opportunity.” I understand this response complexly both as a sign of hope—that young people now have indeed experienced a different reality than that of their counterparts in the 1960s—and an indication of the extent to which post-racial ideology permeates American society, underscoring the need to foster students’ capacity for social and political critique.

We try to foreground the relevance of the past to the present by focusing toward the end of the semester on policies like “stop and frisk” and the Supreme Court’s ruling in the summer of 2013 that struck down the key elements of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. We ask students to research the resegregation of neighborhoods and schools, the persistence of hunger and homelessness, the extreme inequality in global wealth—according to a staggering 2014 Oxfam report, 85 people own as much wealth as the entire bottom half of humanity (Fuentes-Nieva and Galasso 2)—and the disproportionate number of impoverished black and Latino families. At the same time, we understand the appeal of a post-racial society and the complex realities of our students’ lives. The students’ sense of how much society has changed since the 1960s is both accurate and false. At urban campuses like mine in which white students constitute only 28 percent of the student population, diversity is the rule, not the exception; nor does a black/white binary apply to today’s global and interfamilial mix of ethnic, national, and cultural identities. Post-racial ideology is confirmed on the one hand by highly visible “black exceptions”—President Obama, Colin Powell, Oprah Winfrey, Jay-Z—and unsettled, on the other, by countless examples of racism, including the students’ own encounters with racial injustice.

Activism—old and new—takes place outside the classroom. By historicizing the production of race and engaging in rhetorical analysis of history in class and in the field, students lift the veil of neoliberal, post-racial ideology to reveal widening racial and class inequalities and begin to explain them as a result of human actions, past and present—a prerequisite for political activism if, to paraphrase Marx, the point is not only to interpret the world but to change it. However, as my colleagues and I have discovered by testing this thesis with successive cohorts of students, more than intellectual engagement is needed to forge a new historical and political consciousness. Learning about some of the most heinous, murderous chapters of human history—especially when such

knowledge dispels firm beliefs in American democracy, freedom, and equality—can sap the energy right out of a classroom of eighteen-year-olds.

Perhaps the most crucial lesson for me in teaching these two classes is to link critical analysis to explorations of resilience. Despite many examples of resistance, from slave rebellions to civil disobedience, neither class emphasizes resilience adequately. I recently heard a panel of students attest to a life-changing course they took called *Against All Odds: The Black Experience*, co-taught at Evergreen State College by professors Joye Hardiman and Kabby Mitchell and aimed at: “Enhanced appreciation and comprehension of those elements that result in resiliency and indigestibility while in the belly of the beast.” Teaching political literacy in an age of colorblindness requires lifting a powerful ideological veil. Students may feel despair, frustration, and anger in response to what they learn. In *Against the Odds*, students explore how black men and women found the “insurmountable courage to deconstruct and reconstruct their lives.” Such courage sparks activism and lets us disentangle ourselves from the guilt and pain of a collective history that implicates all of us. Understanding our very personal stake in global justice, we might shift from identification *as* a racialized, gendered body to identification *with* others in a move that can free us from the constraints of disabling subject positions like white liberal guilt or that sense of “twoness” Du Bois understood as alienation.<sup>11</sup> This shift might in turn enable a critique of oppressive systems as we embrace the just causes of all people whether or not they are different from us.

Thus, in addition to learning how U.S. history contradicts the rhetoric of the founding fathers, we want our students to respond—personally and politically—to how this historical pattern continues to unfold in all our lives, and to understand what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. meant when he declared in 1968 that, “True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring” (158). Previously, we concluded each semester with a story circle in which everyone told about a time they witnessed, experienced, and/or stood up against injustice. Almost always among the students’ stories are personal accounts of racial profiling, “stop and frisk,” use of the “n” word by police; it is in the course of sharing these visceral experiences that the post-racial dream collides with realities they have personally experienced, ushering in a new synthesis of what they know and what they think. Going forward, we plan to make the story circle a more regular feature of the class, a collective practice aimed at deeper, more integrated learning. A new activist movement will require “resilience and indigestibility,” a lesson one Pathways student hints she has taken away from the class when she describes her self as having been “injected ... with a little activist blood.”

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As this special issue goes to press, additional signs of resistance can be seen in #BlackLivesMatter at home and abroad with Syriza's victory this past January in Greece and the growing popularity of Podemos in Spain.

<sup>2</sup> For example, in May 2013, invoking "the politics of exhaustion," Jeffrey St. Clair called the American left "an immobilized and politically impotent force."

<sup>3</sup> See bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*.

<sup>4</sup> See [www.teach.archives.org](http://www.teach.archives.org) for a full account of SAFA, including information about the project, articles by participating faculty and staff, in-archives exercises across several disciplines designed for first-year college students, and student artifacts.

<sup>5</sup> See *Writing and Community Engagement: A Critical Sourcebook* (Deans, et al.)

<sup>6</sup> The project grew out of an already existing partnership between the alternative high school and LIU's Student Life Office. In search of a community partner but concerned about issues of sustainability, I was delighted to discover that LIU already had a connection with the high school, which was in close proximity to the campus and fit remarkably well with my goals of engaging my students in community writing and critically examining a site of literacy at the intersection of schooling, the prison industrial system, and systemic racism.

<sup>7</sup> Funded by a 2012 NEH Digital Humanities Startup Grant, a team of faculty and students created a mobile application, accessible at <http://beta.brooklynfreedom.org>, mapping the oral histories in time and space.

<sup>8</sup> While space will not permit me to discuss this very recent change (fall 2014) in the Pathways curriculum in detail, so far my colleagues and I have found that expanding the scope of subject matter fosters interdisciplinary and intersectional thinking.

<sup>9</sup> English 173 students and I gained some insight into the high school students' fierce resistance to our offers of mentorship and tutoring by reading Herb Kohl's "I Won't Learn from You: Thoughts on the Role of Assent in Learning." In particular, his concept of "not-learning" as a way to subvert remediation and as a healthy response to a "hostile society" has helped me rethink how to partner with the alternative high school.

<sup>10</sup> The student used pseudonyms for the high school and all the people involved in it.

<sup>11</sup> Du Bois also means "second sight" here, a "more positively-laden notion" (56), as Ernest Allen Jr. points out. I do not mean to suggest that people who have been historically oppressed should surrender their identities but rather that bringing about structural and social change is a collective struggle.

## WORKS CITED

- Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New P, 2012. Print.
- Allen, Ernest Jr. "Ever Feeling One's Twoness: 'Double Ideals' and 'Double Consciousness' in the Souls of Black Folk." *Contributions in Black Studies* 9 (1992): 55-69. Print.
- Bitzer, Lloyd. "The Rhetorical Situation." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968): 1-14. Print.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. Mineola: Dover, 1994. Print.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. 1968. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000. Print.
- Fuentes-Nieva, Ricardo, and Nick Galasso. "178 Oxfam Briefing Paper." Oxfam International. Oxfam GB, 10 Jan. 2014. Web. 4 Aug. 2014.
- Gellman, David. "The Problem of Abolition in the Age of Nation Building: New York's Founding Fathers Reconsidered." Columbia U/Gilder-Lehrman Institute Conference. New York City, 10 Dec. 2004. Conference Paper. Web.
- Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd. "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past." *The Journal of American History* 91.4 (2005): 1233-63. Print.
- Hardiman, Joye, and Mitchell Kabby. *Against All Odds. The Black Experience*. Spring Quarter 2014. Syllabus. Evergreen State College. Print.
- hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Horne, Gerald. *The Counterrevolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of America*. New York: New York UP, 2014. Print.
- Jefferson, Thomas. "Draft of the Declaration of Independence." *Negotiating Difference: Cultural Case Studies for Composition*. Ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg. New York: Bedford/St Martin's, 1995. 174-79. Print.
- . "From Notes on Virginia (1788)." *Negotiating Difference: Cultural Case Studies for Composition*. Ed. P. Bizzell and B. Herzberg. New York: Bedford/St Martin's, 1995. 180-87. Print.
- King, Jr., Martin Luther. "Beyond Vietnam." *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2001. 133-64. Print.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*. Trans. Ben Fowkes. New York: Vintage, 1977. Print.
- Nixon, Richard M. "Transcript of the President's State of the Union Message to Joint Session of Congress." *New York Times*, 23 Jan. 1970. 22. Web. 4 Aug. 2014.
- Petry, Ann. *Miss Muriel and Other Stories*. New York: Dafina, 2008. Print.
- Purnell, Brian. "'Taxation without Sanitation is Tyranny': Civil Rights Struggles over Garbage Collection in Brooklyn, New York during the Fall of 1962." *Civil Rights in New York City: From World War II to the Giuliani Era*. Ed. C.Taylor. New York: Fordham UP, 2011. 52-76. Print.
- St. Clair, Jeffrey. "The Silent Death of the American Left." *Counterpunch* 24-26 May 2013. Web. 3 Aug. 2014.
- Washington, George. "Letter to Robert Morris." *American Antislavery Writings: Colonial Beginnings to Emancipation*. Ed. J. G. Basker. New York: Library of America, 2012. Print.
- Wright, Richard. *12 Million Black Voices*. 1941. New York: Basic, 2008. Print.
- Zeese, Kevin, and Margaret Flowers. "Lifting the Veil of Mirage Democracy in the United States." *Truthout*, 13 Feb. 2013. Web. 3 Aug. 2014.

# "Teaching Must Be Our Demonstration!": Activism in the Prince Edward County Free School Association, 1963-1964

Candace Epps-Robertson Michigan State University

## KEYWORDS

Free School, Brown v. Board of Education, critical pedagogy, race, citizenship

September 16, 1963, one day after the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church bombing that killed four girls in Birmingham, Alabama, 1,500 children in Prince Edward County, Virginia, anxiously awaited their first day of school. The opening of the Prince Edward County Free School Association (Free School) marked the first time in four years that free schooling was available to both black and white children in this community. Four years prior, on June 2, 1959, Prince Edward's Board of Supervisors voted to withhold funding and close public schools in resistance to the Brown v. Board rulings. County-funded public schooling would not resume in this community until September of 1964. While the name Prince Edward may not have the same resonance as Birmingham, Montgomery, Little Rock, or Saint Augustine, this community bore witness to pivotal events in the civil rights movement's fight for equitable education.<sup>1</sup>

Free School classrooms existed in a community that deemed it a (white) civic duty to cease public schooling. The school closures gave rise to dynamic classroom and extracurricular-based responses to white supremacist ideology. This article places the Free School as a site where teachers were provided pedagogical guidance to assume roles as classroom activists in their quest to provide black and white students, aged 6 to 23, with literacy instruction inextricably tied to preparation for becoming active citizens. In this article I describe pedagogical practices employed by Free School teachers to support the school's mission of helping students "acquire the knowledge, attitudes, ideas, and skills required for effective citizenship in a democratic society" (Sullivan, "Handbook" 2). To best explain these practices I first provide a brief historical context for the Free School. Archival sources and contemporary interviews with former Free School students are then used to present teaching practices that supported teaching as a demonstration against white supremacist ideology. Finally, I reflect on what this history means for both contemporary classrooms and community organizations dedicated to confronting issues around race, citizenship, and access.

## Education and Democracy: Locked out in Prince Edward County

Conversations about democratic education and teaching for liberation have informed pedagogical theory and practice for decades. The Free School placed emphasis on the creation of classroom spaces where teachers could put into practice their commitment to demonstrate to students that they were valued intellectuals who deserved access to democracy, the antithesis of the discourse and action supported by the larger (white) Prince Edward community. The connection between preparation for citizenship through literacy instruction and public education finds its origins in the beliefs of the early proponents of public education: schools should be places to instill traits desirable for citizens of a democracy.<sup>2</sup> Historically, the American public education system, much like Prince Edward county, has a complicated relationship with traditionally marginalized communities.

In the black community there is perhaps no better marker of this struggle than *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954, 1955). As Catherine Prendergast suggests, the very reasoning behind the *Brown* case articulated the connection between education and citizenship: “the court thought on a grand scale that the rationale in *Brown* for ending legalized segregation rested on defining public education as the precursor to good citizenship” (17). The *Brown* rulings were as much about rethinking what it meant to create opportunities for people to learn the necessary skills for becoming citizens as they were about providing the grounds for physical separation to cease. It is not surprising that resistance to *Brown* spread quickly. The mandate to integrate schools was enough to cause many Southern states to strategize resistance. Directly after the first *Brown* ruling in 1954, Virginia came to set the precedent for Massive Resistance, the movement that gained major traction throughout the South. Both state and local lawmakers developed legal “solutions” to halt integration.<sup>3</sup> On paper many of these measures were repealed by 1959; however, Prince Edward’s defiance would persist.

In the fall of 1959 with all public schools closed, the white community opened and enrolled most of the white children of the county in a private segregation academy, The Prince Edward Foundation. The black community responded by developing grassroots plans to assist its children. Church groups helped the community provide “training centers” in black churches and other no-cost spaces. These programs provided students temporary tutorial services in math and reading and socialization through recreational opportunities.<sup>4</sup> Parents who were able home-schooled their children while other families were forced to relocate. Allies from outside the county, such as the Quaker American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), offered support through student placement programs, lobbying the federal government for attention, and simply being present in the county as supporters. Amidst continuous stalling from judges and court orders, these grassroots efforts continued intermittently until the Free School’s opening in 1963.

In the fall of 1962 a petition signed by 650 black parents from Prince Edward reached President John F. Kennedy’s desk, reminding him of the need for action. The petition, circulated by noted Virginia civil rights leader Reverend L. Francis Griffin, the AFSC, and members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) “called on Kennedy to sponsor a

survey to measure the size of the educational problem in the county and to back a program designed to help the children prepare for the reopening of the schools" (Smith 237). While Kennedy inherited the Prince Edward crisis in 1961, it is debatable why it took him close to two years to respond. Some scholars have suggested that he was motivated to respond out of fear that Prince Edward's solution to close public schools for indefinite periods would spread throughout the South. Kennedy lacked federal precedent and had to be careful crafting an intervention (Lee 20). Whatever the rationale, President Kennedy, his brother Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and members of his administration began to investigate methods outside the judicial to aid in the development of a temporary school program. In coordination with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and researchers from Michigan State University it was recommended that "the administration assist in the development of a free private school system, available to all wishing to attend—both black and white—for the 1963-1964 school year" (Lee 25). Additionally, the team made several concrete suggestions for what they felt would benefit the community and students: an integrated faculty, small classes, un-graded instruction, emphasis on special education and pupil services, and periodic testing (Lee 25). The Free School was divided into upper and lower units. The upper unit, called Moton High, served ages 16 to 23 with the lower unit serving students ages 6 to 15. Of the 1500 students who enrolled and attended eight were white, making this the first integrated school in Prince Edward.

Neil Sullivan from the Union Free School in Long Island, New York, was tapped to be superintendent. A friend to the Kennedy family, Sullivan was known for his progressive hiring practices: he employed black faculty in his predominately white school and touted innovative pedagogical strategies such as team teaching and non-graded instruction models. In one month Sullivan moved to Virginia and began the tasks of securing buildings, hiring faculty, developing a curriculum, and recruiting students. Sullivan drafted a handbook in which he clearly outlined the mission of the school to: "develop and expand desirable character traits acceptable to a democratic people" (Sullivan, "Handbook" 3). If the very purpose of public education in America has traditionally been to instill citizenship for a responsible democracy, then the Free School had a most unusual set of circumstances to do this within. One of Sullivan's most important duties was the hiring of teachers, not an easy task with less than a month before the school's first day.

Sullivan cast a wide net for administration and faculty: the local Prince Edward teaching community, networking amongst friends, the National Education Association, and Peace Corps. Drawing upon local resources was paramount to the success of the school being accepted in the community. His local search proved the most fruitful as he secured two teacher-administrators from surrounding counties: Willie Mae Watson and John B. Cooley. Both proved integral in providing pedagogical training and support to teachers who would come to the Free School from across the country.

In late August 1963 Sullivan directed the opening faculty convocation for Free School teachers and staff. In his memoir, *Bound for Freedom: An Educator's Adventures in Prince Edward County, Virginia*, Sullivan recounted his testimony to faculty about their teaching: "Finally, I would say that we all have feelings about civil rights, and demonstrations seem to be the order of the day here in Farmville. But our job in the Free Schools is teaching—and teaching must be our way of demonstrating

our convictions” (77-78). This charged statement was a direct reflection of Sullivan’s perspective on the state of race relations in Prince Edward. Prior to the Free School’s establishment, the summer of 1963 saw direct action come to Prince Edward in the form of organized marches and sit-ins at local restaurants and stores. Historians have suggested that throughout his time in Prince Edward, Sullivan was concerned with drawing the ire of segregationists (Titus 156). While we may never know Sullivan’s true intentions, I argue that both Watson and Cooley answered this call to demonstrate conviction through the crafting of pedagogical strategies that encouraged an activist teaching stance in both the classroom and extracurricular activities. Evidence for this type of pedagogy is found in Watson and Cooley’s handbooks, curricular guides, classroom reflections composed by teachers under their charge, and contemporary interviews with former students. These sources reveal that activist teaching in these classrooms was predicated upon a pedagogy that connected Free School students to the world outside of Prince Edward County, valuing students’ home epistemologies as equal to school-based knowledge, and through the provision of extracurricular activities that allowed for student-led activism.

## "Facilitating the Maximum Learning Experience of All Children": Willie Mae Watson's Guidelines for Teaching and Development

Willie Mae Watson, Director of Elementary Curriculum, came into her position with a legacy of teaching and leadership connected to social change. Watson, a former Peace Corps volunteer, teacher, and public school administrator for black schools in the nearby Norfolk Public School System, brought a wealth of experience and energy to the Free School. As director, she was charged with developing curriculum and pedagogical support for teachers. Initially there was discussion between Sullivan and the trustees about the Free School following a tutor-service model—catching students up as best they could. Watson wanted to make this experience meaningful for students by giving them a structure akin to traditional schooling (courses in math, science, language arts, along with after-school activities). Despite her mission of providing the traditional, as her pedagogy will demonstrate, she was cognizant that this wasn’t an ordinary school.

Most of Watson’s pedagogical guidance is found in her curriculum guides, bulletins she referred to as “Curriculum Notes,” and supplemental teaching materials. Watson’s pedagogy, as stated in her own words, was driven by helping teachers “help pupils solve problems that are meaningful to them” (Curriculum Notes #6). Watson’s teachers were given instructions for how best to provide classroom spaces where students were respected and celebrated members of the community.

Watson encouraged teachers to connect students with the world outside of Prince Edward County. Her memos offer records of some of the events organized to facilitate these connections. She describes films shown during assemblies about Africa, Europe, and other parts of the world, guest lecturers from across Virginia and the United States, and field trips. Watson urged teachers to make ample opportunities for students to listen to radio, television, and other media recordings (“Curriculum Guide”). A robust audiovisual program made it possible for students to have access to news and educational programs. These opportunities for listening sessions spoke to a desire for

students to connect with the world around them, not just to mimic what was being spoken. In spite of the ways some white residents sought to determine what access blacks could have to the public sphere, incorporating television and radio news provided students an outlet for seeing themselves as part of local and national conversations.

In addition to media, field trips, and visitors, Watson compiled a four-page pamphlet called "About Prince Edward," in which she turned the focus to home. This pamphlet chronicled black Prince Edwardians and their contributions to government, education, and the church on local and national levels. The alternative history Watson's pamphlet creates both disrupted the grand historical narrative of Prince Edward that focused on the county's wealthy white slave owners and demonstrated that the black community had a long legacy of being agents for social justice. The introduction of outside news sources and Watson's revisionist history lesson gave teachers guiding materials to support the classroom as a space where positive dialogue about black contributions could be at the center and demonstrate to students that black lives mattered.

Watson's regularly circulated "Curriculum Notes" offered pedagogical guidance on everything from the physical set-up of classroom space to annotated bibliographies intended as professional development. One suggestion found across several of her bulletins was a consistent reminder of the importance of providing students time and space to talk and share their experiences about what they were learning, a practice she referred to as "talk-time:" "children need to do more talking and more listening to one another rather than to the teacher only" (Watson "Curriculum Note #11"). Teachers saw this technique of sharing student knowledge as central to the positive progression of students. One language arts instructor described its significance and practice this way: "The technique or method of beginning each day with 'talk-time' has gradually caused each pupil to make a contribution as they talk about: weather reports, news events, etc. This sets the stage for effective learning throughout the day" (Shipp 1). The practice allowed teachers to understand what topics were important to their students and also demonstrated the first step in activist teaching: listening. Another instructor acknowledged the significance of this practice because it encouraged the participation of all: "Using examples based on experience [enables] everyone [to] contribute" (Pener 1). Starting with student experiences began the day with an expression of the importance of student voices and knowledge. Further, because many students in the lower unit began their Free School year unable to read and with a justified distrust of teachers, Watson encouraged her teachers to allow students to do all kinds of speaking—from stories, jokes, and riddles to more formal speaking activities such as giving directions, relaying messages, and giving oral reports in class ("Curriculum Notes #11"). These activities allowed the classroom to be a welcoming space for a wide range of student expression. Affording students opportunities to practice speaking that would have been beneficial both inside and outside of the classroom signaled to students that both their home and school learning were valuable.

Talk-time and the encouragement of creative expression were not practiced without difficulty. Many teachers spoke of the quandary talk-time presented them with as some struggled to follow the stories of children who often blended real events with the imaginary or relied heavily on folk wisdom and knowledge: "In observing a group of children, I realized that they had learned to

substitute the unreal for the real” (Griffin 1). To respond to this concern, Watson reminded teachers of the importance of listening with respect and not allowing traditional notions about teaching and learning constrain Free School classrooms so that they could: “free [themselves], and the children to talk, write, and dramatize spontaneously” (Watson, “Memo,” 1964). She asserts that teachers had obstacles to overcome in developing good relationships with their students noting that they had: “barriers to overcome in ourselves as adults and teachers, in order to listen and look with sensitivity” (Watson, “Memo,” 1964). Watson’s recognition that the teachers themselves could be barriers was crucial in the Free School. Many teachers came from outside of Prince Edward and struggled to understand their students and the community.

In this same memo, Watson continued to ask teachers to explore ways that all student voices could be welcomed, echoing the importance of practices such as talk-time: “Oral expression may be developed through well planned lessons that provide for active participation from the least able to the most able student” (“Memo,” January 1964). Her encouragement for teachers not to be bound by their expectations reinforced the necessity of having a pedagogy driven by acknowledging and respecting the agency of students. These teachers were activists in the classroom not just because they provided students with literacy skills but because of the way they shared this space with their students and appreciated them. This was an antithesis to the treatment most blacks received by the larger white Prince Edward community, and for the white students enrolled it offered a different perspective of cross-racial relationships.

If Watson sought to make this school experience the same as any other, then reflections from one student suggest that this was a success. During an interview with Mrs. Bernetta Watkins, who was nine when she began her Free School year, she recounts that there was very little that stood out in terms of the work she did in the classroom:

We did a lot of reading aloud and we had like worksheets. I know I remember lots of worksheets and tests. You know standardized tests? We had a lot of those. But other than that, I don’t remember anything unusual. You went to the board, worked problems on the board. And like I said, in reading, everybody took turns reading aloud and did worksheets afterwards. Those are the things I remember and I don’t remember anything we did any different that stood out from that next year.

Mrs. Watkins’s testimony demonstrates that Watson’s goal of providing students with a traditional school year was quite successful. Both Watson and her teachers challenged the notion that black students weren’t worthy or able to become full citizens by providing them with a space to practice the very thing they had been denied. Watson knew that central to this work was to put in place a pedagogy that would allow students to feel welcome and that they belonged in this space and could do the work.

## Robert Russa Moton High School: Vicars of the Democratic Tradition

James B. Cooley, from neighboring Brunswick County, was highly sought after by Sullivan for the position as principal of the upper school, which students affectionately called Moton High after the local all-black high school. Sullivan recruited Cooley from his job in Brunswick County where he worked as Assistant Principal. Cooley's work was especially challenging because the high school student body was comprised of teenagers and young adults. Students who were sixteen or seventeen when schools first closed were now in their early twenties. As one teacher recounted in an anonymous reflection evaluation, on the first day a student remarked in amazement, "I'm as old as some of my teachers!"

Cooley's approach to designing and implementing pedagogies geared toward student success and retention was similar to Watson. First, he advocated for students to be given a traditional high school experience through the school's course offerings and extracurricular activities. Second, Cooley encouraged his faculty to extend student learning outside of the classroom as a means of welcoming the wealth of knowledge and experiences students brought with them. Finally, extracurricular activities, like a voter registration drive and student newspaper, offered opportunities for both students and teachers to be activists.

Cooley spent the first portion of the Free School year getting the school accredited, a move that would allow the graduating class to obtain state-recognizable diplomas. Following Virginia's high school accreditation procedures meant that the school provided the same types of courses found in any other high school: English, Government, Math, and Science. Cooley wanted to allow students an opportunity to earn a college preparatory diploma and to not be confined to a remedial curriculum. To offer students an opportunity to have a college preparatory diploma in a county that for four years took that opportunity away from its students was quite an achievement.<sup>5</sup>

Courses were taught in small groups to offer students the maximum chance to succeed. In these small group settings teachers were described as "consultants": "Some of the students should be placed in a highly individualized teacher-pupil relationship, especially for advanced courses, with the teacher acting primarily as a consultant to the student, who in turn, would use independent study materials and procedures to the fullest extent" (Sullivan, "Bulletin #10"). Teachers operating as consultants allowed students to progress through the materials at their own pace. This arrangement enabled the implicit hierarchy of the teacher-student relationship to be subverted. Many of the teachers were not much older than some of their students and came from outside of the south. Having young, white, teachers for the first time was an adjustment for both students and teachers alike. Structuring classes into sessions where teachers became consultants may have allowed students to feel less marginalized in the classroom. This type of relationship also provided teachers additional opportunities to learn about their students and what mattered in their lives. One teacher had this to say about the opportunity to offer individualized pedagogies: "[The] individual approach to each [student] seems to give him a sense of the personal interest of the teacher in him as a person" (Teacher Evaluation, 2). Another teacher commented on how this

structure allowed for individualization of curricular choices for her students because she was able to “assign each pupil with individual books,” according to their level and also interest (Teacher Evaluation, 14). These instruction practices made the classrooms safer spaces for students to learn and value their voices. While what happened in the classroom was important, for the upper unit, perhaps more important were the extracurricular opportunities students were afforded outside of the classroom.

Cooley developed a work-study program that allowed students the opportunity to work and be paid for their services as bus drivers, library aides, or in secretarial positions while also attending school. Sullivan described the positive outcomes related to this program: “Jim Cooley made them responsible for their own actions; he also gave them an opportunity to earn spending money (and self-respect) as cafeteria workers, library assistants or playground supervisors. They became first-class citizens almost overnight because they were treated as the adults they were” (Sullivan, *Bound* 121). Sullivan implying that these students may have lacked self-respect or status as citizens came both from being an outsider to the community and his position of privilege. Cooley, however, designed a creative work-study program that understood the unique position of his students as being predominately young, black people in the rural South. The work-study program was part of the larger trajectory of Cooley and Watson’s pedagogy, a pedagogy that understood that the Free School could reflect the importance of students as members of the community even if the larger (white) community did not embrace them. Reverend Robert Berryman, a former Moton school student employed as one of the bus drivers for the Free School, believed that this gave him an opportunity to gain self-respect: “The first thing I can remember is they were looking for bus drivers. Being a student school bus driver that was a tremendous responsibility in and of itself. I also got to play basketball. Coach Jones was hard on us. There was a confidence I built in myself.” Berryman’s responsibility for younger students, tempered with the typical fun of joining a high school athletic team, provides a snapshot of the complex situation many upper school students faced: navigating between the responsibilities of adulthood, while still yearning to enjoy the activities of their school years that had been lost. Cooley’s ability to provide students with extracurricular activities that both gave them the everyday high school activities of students and opportunities to demonstrate their responsibility, speaks to his understanding of this most unique class of students.

In addition to the work-study program, students in the upper school were eager to participate in what could be seen as a pinnacle of citizenship: voter registration. Sullivan’s memoir is the only place where the voting drive is thoroughly described:

Then there was the matter of voting rights. A group of our high school students asked if they could assist in a voter registration drive. For a period of six weeks, with the help of an interested staff, some twenty-four young people from the Free Schools spent all their spare time traveling to a remote section of the county and preparing prospective voters for registration. As a result, over two hundred persons were added to the voter rolls of Prince Edward County. (Sullivan, *Bound* 204)

Interestingly, in Sullivan’s own reflection of students’ success in this endeavor, he mentions two principles that also made the voter drive a success: first, the students knew the community they were

working with; and second, they were committed to the work (Sullivan, *Bound* 204). I cannot ascertain whether students modeled their voter registration program after their own teacher's pedagogical approaches. I do believe however, that the students' desire to participate in the voter registration drive *and* their request for permission and assistance of staff demonstrated the students' awareness of the school's desire to make training and preparation for citizenship a lived practice. Sullivan reflected on the level of student participation in the upper unit with regard to activities outside the classroom such as the voter registration drive:

First, they had the help of a competent adult who was certain that his employment would not be jeopardized by his involvement. Second, they were well prepared. Third, they had some connection, even though sometimes a distant one, with the people they were working among; they were not considered outsiders and they were welcomed into the homes they visited. (Sullivan, *Bound* 204)

Cooley and others knew that to foster and encourage inclusive pedagogies would embrace expressions of activism. Teachers weren't afraid of segregationist reprisal for their work and felt safe in this space, which allowed them to support their students.

The upper unit also emphasized the importance of student-directed self-expression when they sanctioned the establishment of a student newspaper. Students requested a newspaper as a means to share both news and opinions. The *Moton Eagle* became a space that covered serious topics like the school closures as well as lighthearted concerns about entertainment and social happenings. The one issue present in the archives was dated Monday, February 17, 1964 and covered a wide range of news stories and opinion pieces.

In a section called "The Students Speak" students were asked to respond to what *The Eagle* staff described as a "controversial subject." This month's question asked: "Should girls be allowed to wear slacks to basketball games?" A range of responses ensued, from those who thought it was "not lady like" to others who suggested it was "a disgrace" for the school. While these statements may seem trivial, they provide an excellent example of how the school's commitment to supporting student voices surfaced in activities where students were given autonomy and not controlled by teachers.

An editorial in this issue, "What About Schools In 64-65" narrated the school closures and provides important points on that history. The author, an unnamed student, prompts readers to think of Prince Edward's original role in the Brown case, recounts the court's role and asks the simple yet puzzling question: "How can this be constitutional since the Supreme Court outlawed compulsory segregation in 1954?" The student reminds readers that while the outcome in the 1964-65 school years was "important to all Prince Edward County citizens," it was of particular importance for the junior class because "it could mean the difference between finishing school or becoming dropouts by necessity." The author maintains hope that citizens of the county would allow the schools to reopen: "Let us all hope that the people concerned will make their responsibility the best possible education for us all." This editorial showcases one student's astute analysis of the crisis and the direct request for Prince Edwardians to recognize the connection between education and democracy as an issue for all the county's citizens, not just the black community. This newspaper provided students much needed public space to respond to the world around them. Students were supported by a pedagogy

that encouraged teachers to listen to their students and provide support, rather than implementing a liberatory agenda from the top-down.

## Teaching as Activism

The context of the Free School made teaching as an act of activism inevitable. Students were locked out of county-funded public schools for five years solely because of some whites' adherence to inequality. This institution was a counter argument to the rhetoric that kept public schools closed. It should come as no surprise that neither Neil Sullivan nor the federal government was directly responsible for the types of activist teaching I describe. Cooley and Watson's ability to localize Sullivan's goal of preparing students to be citizens was less about pedagogical directives and more about aiding teachers in the cultivation of classrooms where students were already treated as citizens. To do this, teachers had to learn to embrace the knowledge and experience of the students. Watson and Cooley were tasked to lead a group of teachers from across the country to provide pedagogies and curricula that would demonstrate respect for the students and prepare them to assume positions as active citizens in an environment that had denied them basic dignity. These two teacher-administrators embody a principle that is both imperative and easy to forget when assuming roles as activists in communities: respect and listening are paramount in fostering meaningful relationships.

Pedagogical and curricula recovery work is important because of its ability to help us recover voices, sites, and movements that have traditionally been marginalized or shadowed by dominant histories. In this instance, the story of the forced five-year public school closure for children of Prince Edward is a history that is often eclipsed by the celebratory nature of the Brown rulings. The history and context I have presented in this article give us a glimpse of the past, an understanding of histories that shed light on continued persecution and struggle, and provide us with possible tools for battling the same forces that work to disempower and marginalize.

The result of such recovery work is not about finding direct and immediate applications. While we can and should look to the past for a greater understanding of who and where we are, these histories remind us of the importance of context in the development of practice. The Free School is a pedagogical model that asked teachers to be attuned to the needs of their students. Students in the upper division needed diplomas, job training, access to voter registration, and a supportive community. In the lower unit students required a space in which they could continue to practice and learn reading, writing, and speaking without needless judgment and assessment. Students across the Free School needed a place where the racist rhetoric did not determine who they were and what they did. Cooley and Watson, and the teachers under their guidance, provide us with a model, a mantra even, for activist teaching: listen, respect, construct, and reflect. The needs of students were heard. Students' home communities were respected. Educational experiences to meet their needs were constructed. Teachers continuously reflected on just how well they were doing in meeting their goals. These supposedly simple actions aided in the creation of an institution that challenged the white construction of citizenship. The Free School was not without its issues and obstacles, but can be celebrated as a spirit and legacy of social justice and teaching in a way that both empowers and inspires future leaders to continue in the struggle.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>In April of 1951 Barbara Rose Johns, a black sixteen-year-old high school student at the segregated Robert Russa Moton High School in Farmville lead her fellow classmates in a walkout to protest the poor conditions of their schools. This event was also the first strike lead by youth and predates the Woolworth sit-ins in North Carolina. The NAACP's involvement would lead to *Davis v. Prince Edward County*, one of the five cases involved in *Brown v. Board*. For a full history on Prince Edward County and the Civil Rights movement see Jill Olgine Titus's *Brown's Battleground: Students, Segregationists, & the Struggle for Justice in Prince Edward County, Virginia* (2011) and Christopher Bonastia's *Southern Stalemate: Five Years without Public Education in Prince Edward County, Virginia* (2012).

<sup>2</sup>Nineteenth-century education reformers such as Horace Mann and Henry Bernard fought to disrupt the idea that education was only for the rich. Both believed in universal education for the creation of a unified society; however, women and people of color still faced marginalized admission to this 'unified society'

<sup>3</sup>The first Massive Resistance package was passed into Virginia law in 1956. The package included tuition grants for segregated academies and pupil placement boards, and allowed the governor authority to close schools that tried to integrate.

<sup>4</sup>The Prince Edward County Christian Association (PECCA) headed these training centers and carefully defined its existence and creation as not intending to "replace any organization in the County. Rather, its chief objective is to coordinate and strengthen those agencies already in operation. It seeks to render a much needed religious emphasis to its acts of coordination" (PECCA 4).

<sup>5</sup>For more on the curriculum of the Free School, see my chapter "Radical, Conservative, Extreme: The Rhetorical Education of the Prince Edward County Free School Association, 1963-1964" in *Alternative Histories: Composition in Normal Colleges and Secondary Schools, 1839-1969* (University of Pittsburgh P, Forthcoming).

## WORKS CITED

- Berryman, Everett, Reverend. Interview. Sept. 2012.
- Bonastia, Christopher. *Southern Stalemate: Five Years Without Public Education in Prince Edward County, Virginia*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011. Print.
- Cooley, James. "Prince Edward Free School Association: R.R. Moton High School Handbook for Teachers." March 1964. Box 30, Folder 17. The Prince Edward County Free School Papers. Special Collections and Archives, Virginia State University, Ettrick.
- Griffin. "Teaching Evaluation." Series 1: The Prince Edward Free School Association, Oct. 1963. Box 46, Folder 2. The Prince Edward County Free School Papers. Special Collections and Archives, Virginia State University, Ettrick.
- Lee, Brian. "We Will Move: the Kennedy Administration and Restoring Public Education to Prince Edward County, Virginia." *The Educational Lockout of African Americans in Prince Edward County, Virginia (1959-1964)*. Eds. Terence Hicks and Abul Pitre. Lanham: UP of America, 2010. 19-32. Print.
- "PECCA: The Prince Edward County Christian Association." Oct. 1963. Box 1, Folder 10. The Prince Edward County Free School Papers. Special Collections and Archives, Virginia State University, Ettrick.
- Pener. "Teaching Evaluation." Oct. 1963. Box 46, Folder 2. The Prince Edward County Free School Papers. Special Collections and Archives, Virginia State University, Ettrick.
- Prendergast, Catherine. *Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning after Brown v. Board of Education*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2003. Print.
- Shipp. "Teaching Evaluation." Oct. 1963. Box 46, Folder 2. The Prince Edward County Free School Papers. Special Collections and Archives, Virginia State University, Ettrick.
- Sullivan, Neil. *Bound for Freedom: An Educator's Adventures in Prince Edward County, Virginia*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1965. Print.
- . "Prince Edward County Free School Association Handbook." Sept. 1963. Box 33, Folder 23. The Prince Edward County Free School Papers. Special Collections and Archives, Virginia State University, Ettrick.
- "Teacher Evaluation Reports." Oct. 1963. Box 46, Folder 2. The Prince Edward County Free School Papers. Special Collections and Archives, Virginia State University, Ettrick.
- "Teacher Evaluation Reports." Nov 1963. Oct. 1963. Box 46, Folder 2, The Prince Edward County Free School Papers. Special Collections and Archives, Virginia State University, Ettrick.
- Titus, Jill Olgine. *Brown's Battleground: Students, Segregationists, and the Struggle for Justice in Prince Edward County, Virginia*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2011. Print.
- Watkins, Bernetta. Interview. Sept. 2012.
- Watson, Willie Mae. "A New Course of Study." Memo. Mar. 1964. Box 34A, Folder 12. The Prince Edward County Free School Papers. Special Collections and Archives, Virginia State University, Ettrick.
- . "About Prince Edward." Prince Edward County Free School Feb. 1964 Box 33A, Folder 22. The Prince Edward County Free School Papers. Special Collections and Archives, Virginia State University, Ettrick.
- . "Curriculum Notes #5." April 1964. Box 34, Folder 11. The Prince Edward County Free School Papers. Special Collections and Archives, Virginia State University, Ettrick.
- . "Guidelines To Curriculum Development for Primary School and Middle School." Sept. 1963. Box 34, Folder 11. The Prince Edward County Free School Papers. Special Collections and

"Teaching Must Be Our Demonstration!"

Archives, Virginia State University, Ettrick.

---. "Language for Self-Expression, Communication, Enjoyment, Development, Enrichment." Memo. April 1964. Box 34A, Folder 12. The Prince Edward County Free School Papers. Special Collections and Archives, Virginia State University, Ettrick.

# Freire in the Agora: Critical Pedagogy and Civil Discourse

John Pell Whitworth University  
William Duffy University of Memphis

## KEYWORDS

critical pedagogy, civil discourse, Freire, public sphere

Awareness of the world, which makes awareness of myself viable, makes unviable the immutability of the world. Awareness of the world and awareness of myself make me not only a being in the world, but one with the world *and with others*. (emphasis added)

- Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Indignation* 15

Political debate has always been something of a perilous art. This is especially true when arguments get marred in discursive gridlock, when the available means of persuasion are insufficient for promoting compromise. Indeed, when there is no common ground on which to reconcile competing ideologies, bark and bluster usually result. Our current 113th Congress is a case in point; not only is it one of the most polarized Congresses in history, it is also the most unproductive.<sup>1</sup> But something is making this lack of compromise feel especially dire in the current moment. Political discourse doesn't just sound more entrenched as pundits and politicians continue to talk at cross-purposes, it also feels more dangerous. Indeed, voicing one's political viewpoint in a public forum can now result in anonymous rants on websites like 4Chan, where threats of physical violence (especially toward women) are typical responses to political disagreement.

Even national tragedies have become occasions when the threat of physical violence pierces public discourse. After the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012, for instance, the debate over gun control reached a fever pitch. Only a year earlier, many national commentators decried the lack of civil discourse following Jared Lee Loughner's shooting spree in Tucson, Arizona that left six people dead and Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and several others critically injured. Ironically, the shooting happened at a "Congress on the Corner" event in which the Congresswoman was dialoguing with citizens about their various political concerns. During his Tucson memorial address, President Obama suggested that because "our discourse has become so sharply polarized . . . it's important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we're talking with

each other in a way that heals, not in a way that wounds” (“Remarks”). When NRA representative Wayne LaPierre spoke for his organization in response to Sandy Hook, however, rather than call for solidarity or even a moratorium on the gun control debate, he baldly praised how firearms deter the “lethal criminal class—killers, robbers, rapists, gang members who have spread like cancer in every community across our nation” (“Remarks”). While LaPierre’s demure delivery gave his speech an aura of civility (especially when contrasted against the uncivil rants of protestors who repeatedly interrupted him), the content of his remarks completely elided any notion that common ground with gun control advocates—discursive space in which to foster compromise—is a reasonable goal to work toward in the aftermath of such unspeakable violence. In fact, such discourse implicitly rejects the very notion that “public” debate is something that requires shared goals and mutual identifications.

Like most literacy educators, we are committed to promoting civic debate in our classrooms while modeling how to be open and responsive to difference. But lately we have been challenged by how best to discuss these matters with students. Unfortunately, teaching that uncivil discourse is harmful and unproductive increasingly feels like a fool’s errand, especially when our own appeals in the classroom are seemingly undercut every time students turn on the television, log on to Facebook and Twitter, or read some news item about the latest national tragedy. Other literacy educators feel this frustration as well. In a recent thread on the Council of Writing Program Administrators listserv titled “WPAs and Violence in Schools,” a handful of compositionists expressed concern about both the short and long term effects that school shootings have on students. Just hours after a teenager opened fire in the cafeteria at his high school in Marysville, Washington, Patricia Ericsson commented, “How can we expect the exciting collaboration that is teaching and learning to work when teachers and students and parents have to face what is happening today in my home state of Washington” (Ericsson). One responder recommended Richard Miller’s *Writing at the End of the World*, a book that considers the value of the humanities in a world fraught with terrorism, war, and natural disaster.

Miller’s work actually provides a useful foothold into an expanded discussion of the value of political debate in the classroom because he questions pedagogical approaches, especially those labeled critical or “liberatory,” that position reading and writing as “magically transformative powers” (5). In fact, he writes, “it can be quite a shock to confront the possibility that reading and writing and talking exercise almost *none* of the powers we regularly attribute to them in our favorite stories” (5). In this light, we feel compelled to identify what the concept of “civil discourse” actually means as a pedagogical goal. While we make no claim to a definitive answer, what we do ultimately argue is that civility starts when students learn how to orient themselves toward one another *with* instead of *through* discourse itself. The idea of discourse in this approach to civic literacy is not simply a mechanism for creating identifications across difference; rather discourse with others *is* an act of identification. While we will develop this idea below, our goal with this essay is to invigorate the idea that literacy classrooms should be spaces in which to cultivate civil discourse, particularly in the unceasing wake of national tragedies and the mix of civil and uncivil debate that results.

To develop this inquiry, we wish to return to the concept of civil discourse itself and the role it plays in conceptions of critical pedagogy, in particular when imagining the classroom as an *agora*, a

kind of public meeting place. Next we turn to Freire's original argument about critical consciousness and what we believe is too often ignored in his work, namely its pragmatism. Here we highlight the function of contingency and amelioration easily obscured when Freire is deployed as a metonym for abstract pedagogical objectives. Finally we consider what it might mean to reconceive the idea of "civil discourse" as a goal for contemporary literacy education. In the end, we contend it is possible to cultivate discursive environments where students learn to be responsible rhetors without necessarily positing particular models for how this should look in practice.

## CRITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE AGORA

It is perhaps not surprising that our commitment to civil discourse and the responsibility educators have for preparing students to be actively engaged in the public sphere has been influenced by Paulo Freire and the tradition of critical pedagogy. In the early years of Freire's introduction to North American audiences, educators found a philosophical voice that passionately declared why literacy education should at its root be training in "critical consciousness," which for Freire meant awareness of the power dynamics that both influence and constrain the participatory potential of oppressed classes in the socio-political marketplace. When Freire's work began circulating in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, the students entering our college classrooms were obviously quite different from the Brazilian peasants for whom Freire developed his pedagogy. The problem of translating a pedagogy that was preparing oppressed classes to be literate participants in an actual revolution has always presented its difficulties for educators in the United States. Thus, dissenters to critical pedagogy were there almost from the start. Peter Elbow offered one of the earliest critiques for the field of composition in his colorfully titled essay "Pedagogy of the Bamboozled," but since that time other compositionists in addition to Miller have continued to find fault with critical pedagogy (see Durst; Hairston; Wallace and Ewald; Ritter; Ringer; Thomsan-Bunn).

What we find compelling about Miller's critique, however, is his curiosity over why literacy educators *still* invoke Freire to validate teaching the political dimensions of reading and writing. Miller understands why Freire was so appealing in the early years of his adoption by American pedagogues; he even counts himself as one who felt empowered by critical pedagogy as a graduate student. What changed for Miller was the recognition that for most compositionists today, critical pedagogy only offers "a way to see themselves as something other than the mindless functionaries of the state apparatus responsible for tidying the prose of the next generation of bureaucrats" (119). To be clear, Miller is a critic not of Freire but of Freirean pedagogy, in particular the "cherished self-representation" Freire compositionists forward to justify the work of teaching writing in terms of "liberation, uplift, and movement . . . toward a better social world" (*Writing* 121). On the surface Miller's criticism is harsh because he seemingly rejects critical pedagogy *in toto*, but what we see in his critique is a call to carefully analyze how exactly the goals of any pedagogy, not just those of the critical-liberatory variety, are actually realized in practice.

To step back, literacy educators invested in Freire's work see in his philosophy useful concepts with which to foster critical agency in the classroom, to help students become more fully aware

of their social, political, and economic contexts. This goal, teaching students to develop a critical capacity for engaging various systems of power, is essentially what Miller finds problematic within critical pedagogy. But unlike detractors of critical pedagogy who suggest that classrooms should be completely devoid of political activism (e.g., Stanley Fish in *Save the World on Your Own Time*) Miller's cynicism stems more from a place of bewilderment. Simply put, his problem is that critical pedagogues purport to teach students how to empower themselves with literacy even though critical pedagogy itself often relies on specific definitions of literacy, justice, freedom, consciousness, etc., key terms that function as predefined ends with their own value sets.

To argue that civil discourse, then, should be something compositionists teach in the writing classroom begs certain questions about what exactly civil discourse means in these contexts and who gets to decide. When such questions are considered alongside the concerns we raise in the opening of this essay about the relationship between violence, political debate, and the idea of public discourse, we find ourselves wondering if the frustration we feel stems from misidentifying civil discourse itself as a pedagogical object, as something we can actually teach. Part of this challenge is to identify what we believe constitutes the classroom as a public sphere, what Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. termed "the marketplace of ideas" and what residents of the ancient city-state of Athens—the classical birthplace of democracy—called the *agora*, or central gathering space.

Certainly the dialogue and debate that transpire in the news media point to an *agora*, as do the deliberations in city halls, state assemblies, and Congress. These are spaces where ideas get debated, where speech acts must be rhetorically attuned to the various political cultures where one aims to garner assent. While classrooms are certainly places where ideas get deliberated, it seems disingenuous to label these spaces as "publics" representative of an *agora* in an abstract, democratic sense. One reason is because not all ideas are welcomed topics of debate in the classroom. Moreover, classrooms are by definition mediated by a dictator of sorts, the teacher. This is the point Kelly Ritter stresses in her own response to critical pedagogy. Citing Ann Bertoff's reading of Freire as indicative of this phenomenon, Ritter suggests that without the teacher "there is no learning, let alone dialogue" (19). Intended to free students from their submission to dominant, oppressive ideologies, critical pedagogies demand that "students must be paradoxically *directed* to free themselves; thus the teacher-figure plays a central and perhaps inextricable role in re-shaping student consciousness" (Ritter 37). In other words, critical pedagogy requires a teacher to *authorize* students to assume the subject positions necessary for becoming "free" agents of a critical classroom. According to this logic, critical pedagogy cannot live up to its own anti-hegemonic idealism, a conclusion similar to that of Miller's.

Literacy educators, us included, nevertheless believe that classrooms are spaces where the arts of civic debate can be taught. Indeed, many compositionists stress to their students that persuasion is something earned through the hard work of rhetoric, not the doublespeak Ezra Pound had in mind when he defined rhetoric as "the art of dressing up some unimportant matter so as to fool the audience for the time being" (200). Rather, rhetoric for most compositionists is what Karen Burke LeFevre describes as "the creation and communication of knowledge through symbolic activity" (5). The work of teaching argument is to help students make sense of this symbolic activity in ways that expand their abilities as writers and orators. Ideally, then, students who internalize this view of rhetoric

learn to equate civic debate with the qualities of sincerity, judiciousness, and eloquence. They would probably agree, for example, with the editorial published in the *Los Angeles Times* after the Tucson shooting in which the newspaper criticized “hate-inspiring political speech” and reminded readers that extreme partisanship “is bad not because it encourages political assassinations but because it debases discourse and fuels anger, incivility and stubbornness” (“Vitriol and Violence”). Public calls for civil discourse like this one are consonant with invocations of Freirean-style “dialogue” in critical pedagogy. As Amy Lee explains, “a critical writing classroom seeks to implement processes by which students might acknowledge (and hopefully revise) their concepts of self, other, and world as constructions, as one concept along a range of choices” (153). To *pace* Miller, the challenge of using ideas from thinkers like LeFevre and Lee lies in how to actualize the goals of their pedagogies in ways that transcend the abstract realm of sentiment. Invoking the language of critical pedagogy is easy, but actually articulating what pragmatic consequences such language supposedly points to is much more difficult.

It thus seems one of the first steps in rethinking the function of civil discourse in pedagogical terms is not to assume there exists a single, recognizable *agora* in which speech is universally interpretable, one in which transparent thought motivates straightforward discourse unencumbered by ideologies that would exclude anyone from the forum itself. Not surprisingly, idealized constructions of the *agora* usually begin with a tempered view of how discourse actually functions in the public sphere. This is certainly the case in critical pedagogies that assume students-as-citizens *want* to productively dialogue with one another. To echo an observation Michael Bernard-Donals develops in “Against Publics,” if the *agora* is to be imagined as a public space capable of sustaining civil discourse, it must be a space that allows differences to coexist without co-opting participants by requiring them to ameliorate conflict. In order to be a place for civil discourse, in other words, the public sphere also needs to be a place where differences are not only recognized but allowed to flourish. Stephen Yarbrough notes that accounting for difference is what actually makes deliberative discourse possible. Disparity in attitude and belief, in other words, *is* the reason for discursive interaction. Discourse that leads to novelty, whether novelty is understood as new solutions to old problems or the recognition of new conditions, begins when speakers account for their disparities (Yarbrough 10). Yarbrough, like Bernard-Donals, understands that for discourse to be civic it must first be civil; it must recognize and engage other speakers.

Here is where we locate one of the first moves necessary for pragmatically enacting the values of critical pedagogy in the *agora* of the classroom: focus should be directed not on *naming* specific concepts or theories or outcomes, but on *interacting* with the specific discourses that makes something like “naming” in the critical pedagogical sense such a complicated and complex discursive act. Indeed, compositionists invested in critical pedagogy could benefit from stepping back from the concept of “critical pedagogy” itself to consider the different ways we invoke its language to describe our work. The same goes for invoking Freire. That is, we should not conflate Freire-as-historical figure with Freire-as-metaphor. As Susan Jarrett explains, metaphors as “figures of substitution” sometimes obscure the fact that “standing in for another” obviates the particulars that metaphor is intended to represent (113). In other words, while compositionists have long invoked Freire as a metaphor for

critical pedagogy, this solicitation obfuscates the differences between the rural Brazilian countryside that informed Freire's thinking and the university classrooms of North America that inform our own. More to the point, forwarding Freire's work as an impetus for our own critical pedagogies is problematic if we treat Freire as a metaphor, or, more specifically, as a metonymy for whatever practices we choose to label "critical." To echo Jarrett, this metonymy "creates a chain of associations" (113), one that binds artificial contexts to imagined significations that may run contrary to their originating conditions.

Understanding the metonymic link between Freire (as metaphor) and the critical pedagogies invented in his name suggests to us that simply pointing to his work isn't particularly useful for explaining what literacy teachers believe they enact when they channel the language of critical pedagogy. This also applies to our own questions about civil discourse and how best to introduce it as a critical concept in the classroom. With that said, we do believe it is possible to productively utilize Freire's work in a way that underscores the link between critical pedagogy and civic debate, but only by placing it in a contiguous relationship with another "critical" kind of discourse, that of North American pragmatism.

## DISCOURSE IN PROCESS

When teachers believe they can draw on critical pedagogy to accomplish in some verifiable way the goals of helping students identify, critique, or intervene in the sociopolitical systems of oppression that inform their material conditions, it is likely such pedagogy will fall short. For us the key term here is *verifiable*. Certainly there are educators who use the classroom to exercise political debate, promote social policy, and challenge dominant ideology, but rarely do such actions result in material changes over a ten or fourteen week academic term. As evidenced above, however, this is not a particularly novel observation. Elbow observes that if interpreted literally Freire goes one further than Dewey's philosophy of experiential learning: "he is insisting that the action must be more than a 'laboratory' or 'practice' kind of action. It must be sincerely designed to make a [concrete] difference in the real world" (90). Ironically, those who critique what they view as critical pedagogy's inherent naiveté make a similar mistake insofar as they try to unequivocally demonstrate the futility of "teaching to transgress," to echo the title of bell hooks's critical pedagogical manifesto. On the one hand there are those who suggest Freire's pedagogy is legitimate only to the extent it is enacted literally, while on the other there are critics who suggest that because Freire's work is so unique and specific to its original time and place, it is futile to think it could be replicated in North American contexts. The ease with which teachers and scholars will sometimes attempt to transparently enact or indifferently cast aside Freire's critical pedagogy suggests to us the need to reconsider how we approach discussions of the teacher-student relationship often highlighted in such discussions. Those who critique critical pedagogy often fail to appreciate Freire's belief in the inventive potential of human beings *in relationship* to name and rename their shared experiences. In this way, the central problem with contemporary critiques of critical pedagogy is an oversight on the part of scholars to recognize Freire's pragmatism.

As Kate Ronald and Hephzibah Roskelly point out, the first part of adapting Freire's pedagogical philosophy for the North American classroom requires that teachers grapple with Freire's insistence that "limit-situations," the material conditions that inform one's understanding of his or her place in the social order, are important to future action but not all-determining. They suggest turning to the tradition of American pragmatism, first articulated by C.S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, to understand this point.<sup>2</sup> "Rereading Freire in the context of American pragmatism . . . might give teachers hope enough to act with their own concepts of untested feasibility in mind, to work systematically in a sustained way for change, as well as to avoid seeing Freire's work from the supposed, and safe, distance of time and space" (Ronald and Roskelly 615). Pragmatism emphasizes the continual process of reflecting upon the outcomes of and reasons for one's actions, to wrestle for an awareness of the conditions that determine the present while locating possibilities for future action. According to Ronald and Roskelly, a pragmatic reading of Freire would challenge teachers to critically examine their own local contexts in order to remake a critical pedagogy that is fitting for the situation.

So while we are sympathetic to critics such as Miller who question liberatory educators who don't interrogate their positioning within the institutional hierarchies of the academy, these positions, like all matters, are mutable problems—"limit-situations"—susceptible to alteration if the teacher is willing to allow his or her self-perception to be revised through dialogue with students, administrators, and peers. These engagements, which liberatory pedagogues cite as providing the means through which our students are empowered to critically engage the social order, also help to define our roles as teachers. Donna Qualley calls this the "essayistic stance," a view of instruction that values dialogue between student and teacher, and one that is evidenced by a teacher's willingness to promote the reflexivity needed to challenge patterns of thought while locating places where "difference" results in different perspectives on the world. As an orientation toward interactions with the other, Qualley explains that this reflexive stance "complicates our understanding and efforts to know by making us self-conscious, cognizant of our role in the production of knowledge" (14). This is a "critical" view of the student-teacher relationship without necessarily taking up a particular tradition of critical pedagogy.

Or to take up a term important to pragmatism, reflexivity in the classroom serves a *mediating* function, bringing the relationships that determine social orders into view. Mediation, which Ronald and Roskelly identify as a key tenet of both pragmatism and Freire's liberation pedagogy, names the "premise that ideas can move beyond their esoteric or oppositional characteristics and into new relationships" (626). While Freire does not use the term "mediation" in his writing, his notion of "problem-posing" education is akin to this pragmatic ideal. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire describes the meditational nature of problem-posing in the following way:

Problem-posing education, responding to the essence of consciousness—intentionality—rejects communiqués and embodies communication. It epitomizes the special characteristic of consciousness: being conscious of, not only as intent on objects but as turned in upon itself . . . consciousness as consciousness of consciousness. (79)

Put less esoterically, to develop epistemic awareness ("consciousness of consciousness") requires us to reflect upon how our words and actions influence how we perceive the world.

For those of us who teach composition, we can help our students understand that our ideas develop not just as a result of the material conditions impinging upon us, but also according to our “consciousness of consciousness,” how we view the relationships mediating ourselves, cognizable objects like ideas and the contexts that inform them. This is what problem-posing education actually promotes: “men and women as beings in the process of becoming—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” (*Oppressed* 84). Thus while some criticize those who believe the dissolution of the teacher-student binary is a feasible reality, Freire reminds us that the notion of a stable opposition between student and teacher is equally problematic because such a view erroneously imagines that such relationships exist *a priori* to our interaction with one another. For Freire, a dialogic encounter “names” the world; it creates discursive space that makes something like “civil discourse” possible. In fact, one could say that in Freire’s pedagogical paradigm there is no teacher-student relationship prior to discourse; rather, the “teacher” and “student” emerge as agents who interact and apperceive the relationships mediating their engagement.

The great becoming that Freire sees as the heart of learning, the pragmatic process of forging identifications through collaboration and mediation, is precisely the same process we believe might rejuvenate our notion of the *agora*, the place where the political, social, and cultural differences of a citizenry enter into dialogue. While it is tempting to view the Sandy Hook or Tucson tragedies, or more recent ones like Fort Hood or Marysville, as reminders that both the physical and conceptual spaces that house our civic discourses cannot insure safe havens for deliberation, we must take a cue from Habermas and remember that ideal speech situations are just that, they are *ideal*. More often than not the best we can do is strive *toward* those ideals that inform the goals of our teaching, especially during those time when projecting future hope seems impossible. In this way, a pragmatist reading of Freire’s work suggests that if human subjectivity is an infinite, relational process, perhaps too is our civic life. According to Maxine Greene, “His core concern for individual fulfillment was rooted in a recognition that fulfillment could only be attained in the midst of ‘associated’ or intersubjective life . . . [that] the public sphere came into being when the consequences of certain private transactions created a common interest among people, one that demanded deliberate and cooperative action” (435). The person Greene discusses here is not Freire, but John Dewey. Locating a critical pedagogy useful for teachers today, Greene stipulates, requires drawing on the pragmatist tradition as a methodological guidepost.

To be sure, Greene notes how Freire’s philosophy was “informed by both Marxist and existential-phenomenological thought,” a philosophy molded from the material history Freire lived; but still, “a critical pedagogy relevant to the United States must go beyond—calling on different memories, repossessing another history (437, 438). So what does that mean? What does that look like? For starters, teachers of writing and rhetoric might ask students to consider what sorts of situations promote the kind of atmosphere where they feel most open to new ideas. As we demonstrate in the opening of our essay, it is tempting to speak of political gridlock as the root force behind the violence present in much of today’s public discourse, but “toning down” speech, which typically amounts to avoiding discussion with people with whom we disagree, does not necessarily result in the invention of new discursive spaces in which to engage civic debates. If we want an *agora* for

actual civil discourse, a civic space for deliberation and critical engagement with the ideas of others, we must invent it.

Imagining the classroom as an *agora* within which the practice of civil discourse is the established norm proves problematic when these descriptions are given *sans* discussion of the participants themselves. That is, the political ends of the critical classroom are too often assumed to be qualities of the space itself and not the consequence of discursive participation amongst students and teachers. As Elizabeth Ellsworth notes, critical pedagogy is valuable to the extent that it allows students to recognize their own voices as “partial and partisan.” Only then can one’s ideas and observations “be made problematic,” which, if we recall, is what critical pedagogy promotes—not “banking” education but “problem-posing” education (305). As Ellsworth makes clear, problem-posing not only requires that participants engage the differences of others, but that these engagements are allowed to shape subsequent discourse.

Allowing the discursive practices of participants to inform the shaping of an *agora* is difficult, especially if participants’ differences are minimized because participation requires strict adherence to decorous practices intended to abate conflict. The most problematic of these decorous practices, explains Bernard-Donals, is the elevation of rationality as an essential quality of the public space. From this perspective “difference is never altogether different” because speakers assume their interlocutors “possess at least as much discursive or cultural or human sameness” (37). Thus, authentic civil discourse, the kind that assuages conflict and leads to compromise or consensus, cannot occur in an *agora* that requires participants to be “civil.” But many of us still maintain the belief that the public sphere needs to be a place where differences are placed side-by-side in rational order, because this is the only way to deliberate in a manner that leads to utilitarian consensus. Nevertheless, when educators situate conflicts within an idealized public sphere, these debates get easily confused as opportunities to rationally weigh competing claims and reasons; they aren’t recognized as potentially principled clashes that stem from ideological differences unconnected to the processes of rational debate that supposedly imbue the discursive activity required for a meeting of the minds.

To assume that one teaches civil discourse by virtue of naming the conditions that make the classroom a “civil” space thus glosses over the reality that actual moments of conflict rarely lead to tempered agreement, even agreement to disagree. So what, then, are we actually suggesting to teach civil discourse? First, we suggest abstaining from prompts that would encourage students to internalize abstract dictums about the value of civil discourse itself. Students need to experience what it means *to be* civil in their political argumentation with others, and the only pragmatic method for achieving this is to allow students themselves to name what this civility looks like as they experiment with it. Second, we can help students understand that even if we can agree on what something like “civil discourse” means in practice, we can hardly predict its outcome from one context to another. That is, we might come to a collective agreement about what civil discourse means in the particular context of *this* or *that* classroom space, but this collective agreement will have to be constantly renegotiated as we move from one space to another. The *agora* in practice points to the processes of negotiating multiple discourses while accommodating interlocutors, both familiar and strange, as they enter and leave the various conversations in which we ourselves participate.

## CONCLUSION

For critical pedagogues, literacy education is at its best when the members of a classroom confront systems of oppression to identify sites for critical intervention, sites where critical consciousness might be discovered or renewed. While we admire certain aspects of critical pedagogy, we are skeptical of any pedagogy that claims artificial abstractions like “freedom,” “democracy,” or in our case “civil discourse,” as an end point of one’s teaching. In this way, we agree with Paul Lynch in *After Pedagogy* that pedagogical moments “are too complex to be accurately predicted or exploited” (xix). That is, we cannot control what students will do with the experiences they garner in the classes we teach; nor can we force upon them certain attitudes about social justice, difference, or civil discourse that will guarantee our students will “transform” the world to such ends. But what we can do is allow students to *experience* the sociality of discourse by providing them the opportunity to act justly toward one another by recognizing that differences are not the evidence of lack, but of different material conditions. This pragmatic rendering of the classroom as *agora* provides a conceptual space for tracing these differences, for creating identifications through the simple act of using discourse to share in the process of recognizing the conditions responsible for our disagreements. Consequently, once another’s discursive conditions *become* conditions for us, we begin to share the world with them in new ways. This, we suggest, is the kind of literacy instruction that ultimately promotes civil discourse.

Freire encouraged educators and students to see their worlds as always in process, and he believed that when given the time to reflect on their conditions, we “will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge . . . because they [we] apprehend the challenge as interrelated to other problems within the total context, not as a theoretical question” (*Oppressed* 81). As students investigate the world, they will begin to see the difficulties facing them with regard to the continuation of the worlds with which they are familiar. Therefore we should avoid forwarding civil discourse (or any other critical abstraction) as an outcome toward which our teaching is aimed. Otherwise we run the risk of turning these outcomes into mere sentiments.

Teachers cannot control the consequences of their instruction, let alone predict or prescribe artificial results. But we might be able to change our questions from ones that are theoretical to ones that are experiential, from “What *is* civil discourse?” to “What might civil discourse *look like* in *this* class?” In the end, we must allow our students to simply practice what it means to be civil while letting the consequences of their discursive engagements determine how we identify and engage our shared *agora*. In other words, to be in discourse with others *is* to create the material conditions needed for mutual identifications. In the end, the principles of critical pedagogy, usually dressed up in lofty, liberal rhetoric, can be understood to reflect a very simple but very important idea: we are responsible to and for one another. We are collaborators in one world, a common world, and it is through our interactions with one another that this world is continued. To be sure, the world *will* continue, and most of us hope that continuation will be defined by generative discourse, not violence. If this is to be the case in our classrooms, we must abandon static notions of what civil discourse means in the abstract and instead imagine how best to create space for students to show us themselves.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> According to Mark Murray, a political editor for NBC, as of July 2014 only 142 public bills have become law, “down from the 906 the 80th ‘Do-Nothing’ Congress passed in 1947-48, and the 333 that were enacted during the Newt Gingrich-led 104th Congress of 1995-96.”

<sup>2</sup> Ronald and Roskelly compare Freire’s critical pedagogy to the tenets of North American pragmatism, but they don’t conflate the two. Neither do we. Following the work of Ronald and Roskelly, as well as other compositionists like Keith Gilyard (2008) and Thomas Deans (1999), we believe that Freire’s philosophy and that of pragmatism usefully inform each other, especially with their shared emphasis on *praxis*. With that said, philosophers are starting to make more explicit the relationship between pragmatism and Hispanic liberation philosophies (see, for example, Gregory Fernando Pappas’s *Pragmatism in the Americas*).

WORKS CITED

- Bernard-Donals, Michael. "Against Publics." *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory* 28.1-2 (2008): 29-54. Print.
- Deans, Thomas. "Service-Learning in Two Keys: Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy in Relation to John Dewey's Pragmatism." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 6 (1999): 15-29. Print.
- Durst, Russel K. *Collision Course: Conflict, Negotiation, and Learning in College Composition*. Urbana: NCTE, 1999. Print.
- Elbow, Peter. *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986. Print.
- Ellsworth, Elizabeth. "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy." *Harvard Educational Review* 59.3 (1989): 297-324. Print.
- Ericsson, Patricia. "WPAs and Violence in Schools." *WPA-L*. Arizona State U-East, 28 Oct. 2014. Web. 30 Oct. 2014.
- Fish, Stanley. *Save the World on Your Own Time*. New York: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of Indignation*. Boulder: Paradigm, 2004. Print.
- . *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Ed. New York: Continuum, 2000. Print.
- Gilyard, Keith. *Composition and Cornel West: Notes Toward a Deep Democracy*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. Print.
- Greene, Maxine. "In Search of a Critical Pedagogy." *Harvard Educational Review* 56.4 (1986): 427-41. Print.
- Hairston, Maxine. "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 43 (1992): 179-93. Print.
- Jarratt, Susan C. "Encountering the Other: Postcolonial Theory and Composition Scholarship." *Crossing Borderlands: Composition and Postcolonial Studies*. Eds. Andrea A. Lunsford and Lahoucine Ouzgane. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2004. 110-28. Print. Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture.
- LaPierre, Wayne. "Remarks from the NRA Press Conference on Sandy Hook School Shooting." *The Washington Post*, 21 Dec 2012. Web. 10 July 2014.
- Lee, Amy. *Composing Critical Pedagogies: Teaching Writing as Revision*. Urbana: NCTE, 2000. Print. Refiguring English Studies.
- LeFevre, Karen Burke. *Invention as a Social Act*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987. Print. Studies in Writing and Rhetoric.
- Lynch, Paul. *After Pedagogy: The Experience of Teaching*. Urbana: NCTE, 2014. Print. CCCC Studies in Rhetoric and Writing.
- Miller, Richard. *Writing at the End of the World*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2005. Print. Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture.
- Murray, Mark. "Congress on Track to Be Least Productive in Modern History." *NBC News*, 31 July 2014. Web. 30 Oct. 2014.
- Obama, Barack. "Remarks by the President at a Memorial Service for the Victims of the Shooting in Tucson, Arizona." *The White House*, 11 Jan. 2011. Web. 5 Feb. 2014.
- Pappas, Gregory Fernando. *Pragmatism in the Americas*. New York: Fordham UP, 2011. Print. American Philosophy.
- Pound, Ezra. "Vorticism." *Ezra Pound and the Visual Arts*. Ed. Harriet Zinnes. New York: New Directions, 1980. 199-209. Print.

- Qualley, Donna. *Turns of Thought: Teaching Composition as Reflexive Inquiry*. Portsmouth: Heinmann, 1997. Print.
- Ringer, Jeffrey M. "Liberating 'Liberatory' Education, or What Do We Mean by 'Liberty' Anyway?" *Education as Civic Engagement: Toward a More Democratic Society*. Eds. Gary A. Olson and Lynn Worsham. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 277-98. Print.
- Ritter, Kelly. *Who Owns School? Authority, Students, and Online Discourse*. Cresskill: Hampton, 2010. Print.
- Ronald, Kate, and Hephzibah Roskelly. "Untested Feasibility: Imagining the Pragmatic Possibility of Paulo Freire." *College English* 63.5 (2001): 612-631. Print.
- Thomsan-Bunn, Heather. "Are They Empowered Yet?: Opening Up Definitions of Critical Pedagogy." *Composition Forum* 29 (2014). Web. 15 June 2014.
- "Vitriol and Violence." *Los Angeles Times*, 11 Jan. 2011. Web. 26 Jan. 2011.
- Wallace, David, and Helen Rothschild Ewald. *Mutuality in the Rhetoric and Composition Classroom*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2000. Print. Studies in Writing and Rhetoric.
- Yarbrough, Stephen R. *After Rhetoric: The Study of Discourse Beyond Language and Culture*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1999. Print. Studies in Writing and Rhetoric.

# Put Me in, Coach: The Political Promise of Competitive Composing

Stacey Waite University of Nebraska

## KEYWORDS

competition, community, listening, performance, play, self-reflection, slam poetry

In essence, the new alliance—what I have elsewhere called “conservative modernization”—has integrated education into a wider set of ideological commitments. The objectives in education are the same as those which guide its economic and social welfare goals. They include the dramatic expansion of that eloquent fiction, the free market; the drastic reduction of government responsibility for social needs; the reinforcement of intensely *competitive structures* of mobility both inside and outside the school . . .” (emphasis mine)

—Michael W. Apple, from “Competition, Knowledge, and the Loss of Educational Vision”

## COMPETITION CONSIDERED

**I**n a sense, the scope of this article begins in 1988, when I was eleven years old and the only “girl” on the little league team. I hit home runs, and I hit a lot of them. Sometimes more than one in an individual game. So naturally I thought, in the championship game with the bases loaded and my team down 3-1, I was going to hit a home run, or a double at worst. I was bigger and stronger than any other eleven-year-old I had ever met. But then, for the first time, I did something I can’t remember doing before this day. I struck out looking. Game over. I totally blew it.

On the car ride home, I did what any eleven-year-old might do. I blamed the umpire. “Dad, did you see that pitch?” I whined, outraged. “It was like soooo outside.” My father put his hand on my shoulder. “You’re a really good ball player,” he said, “but you struck out. The other kid threw a good pitch, and you struck out.”

This moment has always stayed with me, as have so many other moments I spent competing in sports as a kid. I’ve often thought about the connections between competitive sports and life itself to be, however cliché it can seem in the movies, quite meaningful. But, of course, I also understand how it all goes wrong in the name of competition. In an age of worshipping “the free market,” in a time of the neo-liberal university, in a culture where we have watched football programs value competition

over human decency, it's easy to feel that competition breeds devastation and exploitation—and that it mirrors all the power structures we, as academics and teachers, might resist the most. So I rarely spoke about my experiences as an athlete in the context of academia because those experiences seemed like they could only be read as the antithesis of the kind of progressive pedagogies I, and my colleagues in my field, truly value.

But recently I've been a part of something that has made me want to raise this subject in a more serious way and particularly in regard to how competition might have promise and potential, even as it can (like most approaches) do its share of harm. Educators talk a lot (and rightfully so) about that harm. And I wonder how competition could do less harm, how it could even transform writing communities, be a part of writing activism in the world.

For the past three years, I have had the honor of working with some of the bravest writers I've ever worked with as a poetry slam coach in a local high school in Lincoln, Nebraska, where I also teach at the university. I coach these young poets as part of *Louder than a Bomb Great Plains Youth Poetry Festival* (<http://ltabomaha.org/>), a large statewide competition (run by the Nebraska Writers Collective and poet Matt Mason) in which students from all over Nebraska compete in teams against other schools and other poets. In this context, I have seen competition go right, and I think it's worth discussing the educational, creative, and political implications for how and why it has "gone right." When a gathering of my experiences doesn't seem to line up exactly with my theoretical and political vision, I want to ask questions, to sift through the complicated layers of the questions at hand. My experience tells me there is value in competition. And if there is, what must be the conditions under which competition is generative, interesting, self- and community-building rather than exploitative and destructive?

I began to look for scholars talking about this subject. As I looked to read more about how scholars and researchers have been approaching the subject of competition, I found some interesting trends. First, these search terms often link themselves to articles on business, business models, and business classrooms at universities. Second, competition is often connected to systems of oppression (especially sexism) when it is discussed in articles about education and writing. Third, to say that discussions of competition in the field of Composition and Rhetoric are rare would be an understatement. When competition is mentioned in our field, it is usually referring literally to writing contests or student awards rather than referring conceptually to competition as it might impact writing pedagogy. Finally, those of us who write and work in education are rightfully and significantly critical of competitive models of education as linked to neo-liberalism, corrupt capitalism, and inequality. In fact, I couldn't agree more with Michael Apple in the epigraph to this piece. Yet there is the sense that I (and many other athletes) have had profoundly intellectual and community-building experiences with competition, and the young poets I coach also have had these experiences. I am uninterested in arguments as to whether competition is good or bad for education, or for writers as they learn to write. I find this kind of binary argument pretty boring. I am more interested in the contradictory nature of competition, in how we might see both its dangers *and* its promise at the same time.

As I think about my own history in teacher training (the experiences I've had as both a teacher of writing at the college level and a certified high school English teacher), I can recall being "trained" to see competition as something that could likely divide and defeat my students rather than enrich their classroom experience. Perhaps this is because competition can often get equated with grades, standardized tests, and formal evaluation. Of course, these are institutional modes of competition, which don't necessarily mirror all uses or kinds of competition in all classrooms, even while we cannot separate institutions from our practices. After all, if we believe Audre Lorde, and I certainly do, that our task as political revolutionaries is not to make reforms to already existing systems but to transform or dismantle those systems (111-12), how can we transform our understanding of competition so that it might deconstruct rather than reify systems of domination? For me, the New Activism means rethinking old ideas, transforming systems in order to find new ways of imagining what it means to compete, to write, to have a voice in our current moment.

I happen to believe that the methodologies we use to teach writing are deeply political; craft is political. And because I believe this, I began to look to my poetry slam team in order to think more about why the competition (both between them for spots on the team, and between them and other schools) was not divisive, hierarchical, or damaging, why it was, instead, generative, community building, and deeply introspective. In the remainder of this piece, I want to bring to the surface what I found to be the four possible reasons the young poets thrived in their competitive environment, in the hopes that these aspects of competition could make their way into our classrooms and even change the way we think about competitive structures.

When I watch my slam poetry team compete, I think about the other systems of competition they participate in at school. I think about their ACTs and SATs. I think of the ways some other kinds of "competitive structures," as Apple calls them, make play impossible, render collaboration forbidden, and have little to do with students actually thinking through the questions of who they are, what they want, and how to get there. In 2014, our team wrote and performed a group piece that spoke to the very kinds of "competitive structures" that make competition seem like a bad idea.

GO TO VIDEO: "WHO AM I REALLY?" LINCOLN NORTH STAR GROUP PIECE  
PERFORMED BY KATHAREN HEDGES, KYLAH JULCH, RACHEL VERMILLION,  
AND ALYSSA GEYER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzHGRLn2EE>

Written primarily by Katharen Hedges, this poem illuminates the kinds of competition these writers find oppressive—that *our grades give us the merit to be wanted, that our ACT scores prove how worthy we are of having futures*. However, the poets use the competitive forum of the poetry slam to critique the discourse of competition, to try to take some power back from the competitive structures that seek to define them in ways they find problematic and troubling. The poem is also a performative metaphor for the power of community—the voices around Katharen<sup>1</sup> having the power both to tell her the insidious narratives that damage self-worth *and* to remind her that these competitive structures of cars, boyfriends, colleges, and test scores do not have the meaning "they" suggest. This poem embodies all the aspects of competitive youth poetry slam that these young

writers value: playfulness, community, collaboration, self-reflection, and the significance of an attentive listening audience.

## COMPOSITION AND PLAY

In all of my writing classrooms, I value play, giving my students opportunities to play with and experiment with language and forms. I invite my students to push against convention and traditional notions of what essays or poems are or should be. In their article “Seasoning the Sonnet, Playing Poets: The ‘Sonnet Slam’ as Extrapedagogical Event,” Kirk Melnikoff and Jennifer Munroe talk about the significance of “combining play with pedagogy” as they discuss ways of inviting students to engage the sonnet form (253). The movement between convention and disruption is one that is very significant to me in the classroom. Even combining the poetry slam (which is often thought of as an irreverent or radical space) with the sonnet (often thought of as a stuffy, traditional form) seems to me an interesting approach with contradiction already built into it. But the contradiction is not enough without playfulness.

If you’ve been to a poetry slam, then you know there is a kind of irreverence toward the competition built into the competition, an acknowledgement that, for instance, the time limit is arbitrary. You can note this at many slams across the country, when it is announced that a poet has gone over time and the audience yells, “fuck time.” You can see it in the way that when the host tells the audience of the poetry slam that the competition was invented by Chicago construction worker Marc Smith, everyone in the house shouts, “So What?” as if to suggest that these traditional ways of thinking about histories (that there could be an “inventor” of slam poetry) are mostly bullshit. At the youth slams, this irreverence survives in other ways as well. The judges are booed every time they give *any* poet below a nine. The young poets, even as they are competing, are rejecting the terms of the competition, knowing that the scoring has no inherent meaning even as its temporary and arbitrary meaning can be fun, or rewarding, or entertaining. In “‘The Points Are Kind of the Point, But They’re Not the Point’: The Role of Poetry Slam in Youth Spoken Word,” Susan Weinstein writes, “slam competition is an enactment of the process-versus-product dynamic,” and its “tradition of undercutting its own competitive nature seems a valuing of process over product—of the work put in over the score received. Yet there is no question that youth slam teams take the competition seriously” (178). This seemingly contradictory relationship to the competition—taking it “seriously” *and* taking it playfully all at once—mirrors the relations I encourage my students to have with language more broadly in order to become deeper and more thoughtful writers. The valuing of process over product is something we talk about quite a bit in Composition and Rhetoric, so the connections for me in my college classrooms are rich. The young poets on my team spoke at length about competition, play, and process in their interviews with Sally Nellson Barrett in a film called *Why the Arts Matter*, directed by Barrett and produced by Nebraska Loves Public Schools. Here is what they had to say:

GO TO VIDEO: COMPETITION AND PLAY

<http://nelovesps.wistia.com/medias/s4rzgdvv55>

When Katharen Hedges tells us, “it’s not really a competition,” she goes on to describe what makes it different from traditional notions of competition—namely that “it is really about what the person is saying,” and Katharen herself describes this relationship to competition as really “weird.” She’s right to observe this kind of environment in relationship to competition as really unusual. The poetry slam’s playfulness and irreverence toward its own rules and structures, I think, is a big part of what makes the environment not only more “supportive,” as Katharen puts it, but also a more dynamic and generative literacy experience for the young writers involved.

At the time of this video, Katharen was a senior in high school, though she joined the slam team as a sophomore and had become the beating heart of our team. At practices, Katharen’s feedback to her teammates would always embody this sense of competition and play existing simultaneously. She might tell another poet, for example, what kinds of moves she has seen “score high” at the youth poetry slams, and then also tell the writer that it doesn’t matter what the scores are, or even that sometimes doing something surprising that no one has ever seen score high before is exactly the thing to do because it’s fun to “push the boundaries of the slam genre.” One teammate in particular, perhaps the most serious athlete on the team (a talented basketball player and jumper on the track team), Kylah Julch, took the competition aspect of *Louder than a Bomb* quite seriously. Kylah made it known (to her teammates, but not necessarily to the larger community) from the start of the year that she wanted to “win the whole thing.” Her teammates both respected this and teased her about it at the same time.

Kylah Julch gives us the sense of competition we are more used to—the idea that one would want to come out on top of the competition, but what’s fascinating about what she says is that word “secretly.” She says, “it is part of a competition so you do secretly want to win a little bit.” The fact that Kylah sees wanting to win as a “secret”—in other words, something she might not want the community itself to see during competition—interests me. In what other competitive arena would students feel that their desire to win might be best kept “a secret”? It’s no surprise to me that the students’ relationship to writing changes. For example, the third writer in the video, Savannah Brown, talks about crediting her participation in the slam poetry program with helping her to pass her mandatory state writing test. What would it mean for this version of “competition”—this playful and community-building version—to make its way into standards and testing? What if we accepted that a test, like a score from slam poetry judges, does and does not have meaning? What if we educated students more playfully?

I am not sure we are doing our students any justice when we pretend we are living in a world where everyone wins; neither do we do them any justice when we pretend winning matters in some grand way. What interests me is that I have experienced competitive communities, in both athletics and poetry, in which everyone wins *and* not everyone wins. It is this seemingly contradictory quality that makes competition, to me, full of promise, “creating an alternative culture,” as Rebecca Brown calls it in “Promoting Cooperation and Respect: ‘Bad’ Poetry Slam in the Nontraditional Classroom”—and in this case, I want to consider it an “alternative culture” of competition whereby community is the primary value (576). As Serenity Stokes, a junior at the time of her interview, says: “it makes everything like shiny. Like it makes everything a new opportunity, a new friend, a new

way to help; like it helps everything. It lets you connect and people who I normally wouldn't talk to or wouldn't talk to me cause they're shy or they're mean or whatever . . . If I show them a part of me they show a part back and you get that thing going." That thing is a writing community—something I have tried to form again and again in my own classrooms through writing groups, class readings, and class workshops.

My experience with these young writers has had a profound impact on my college composition courses. I find myself more often looking for the playful place to begin. For example, I might, in a first-year composition course, be expected to teach my students some version of the "research paper." And in the spirit of playfulness, I like to start by asking students to bring in some piece of writing they think is *not* a research paper. Students bring in poems, stories, songs, comedy, comic strips, personal narratives, self-help books, or advertising. And instead of telling my students, "great job, these aren't research papers," I ask them to think about the ways this writing *is* research. There are *very few* times that students bring in a piece of writing that does not have some research involved, some sources that are informing its construction—whether explicit or implicit. This day of class is often a playful day. We are messing with forms, with each other's sense of reality; we are troubling categories—something I think much more significant to the teaching of writing and to our current political moment than if I had shown my students examples of "research papers" and told them to "produce something like this." As a queer person and an activist, I find very few concepts more important to the future survival of queer youth than whether or not the writers I educate can trouble categories and assumptions. Making this "trouble" is, I believe, a transferable and essential aspect of writing and, it so happens, of living.

## COMMUNITY AND COLLABORATION

One common understanding of competition is that it breeds divisiveness rather than community. So I became curious about the *Louder than a Bomb* writing community, wanting to think critically about what made this competitive environment so community oriented. Weinstein puts it this way: "The sense of community and of a communal (that is, a shared, discursively oriented) identity is something that comes up regularly in the interviews I have conducted with young people about their participation in youth spoken word" (174). I see the same patterns of community in Barrett's interviews with my team as well:

GO TO VIDEO: COMMUNITY AND COLLABORATION

<http://nelovesps.wistia.com/medias/uozhox3c0e>.

Serenity Stokes, often called "the mom of the team" by her teammates at Lincoln North Star, responded to this question of community this way:

It's become a family cause I've been here a year and so that's kinda cliché but we really are, like we go to each other's houses, we practice, we hear each other's hearts being set in front of people and we get to watch how they react and stuff and so, its . . . you get really close and you look forward to every time that you see them, you get really excited and it's just an

amazing experience and it made high school worth it.

I wonder, when I hear these young writers talk about their community, how I might bring this kind of community and audience-consciousness (“we hear each other’s hearts being set in front of people”) to my other pedagogical contexts for teaching writing. This year I began bringing competition into my writing classroom—something that, before working with these slam poets, I would not have dreamed of doing. *Competition*, I would have told myself, *is bad for writers, bad for class dynamics*. But when I started incorporating play and collaboration into competition, something changed about its tenor. In my college writing classrooms now, we construct numerous competitions: best opening sentence, best use of a quote, best image, best concluding paragraph, etc. I have noticed my college students really responding to these activities, even when the “winner” in each competition receives only a homemade cupcake as a “prize.” The students argue playfully about what makes a sentence good. Quite honestly, I have never had such dynamic conversations about writing as I have with students when they are trying to decide who “won.” Though I want to keep this piece focused on the high school poets I work with, I also want to keep their impact on my broader teaching practices in view.

Additionally, the young writers on our poetry slam team illuminate for me something service learning advocates and place studies scholars have know for years—something that, admittedly, did not fully hit home for me until now. That something is this: if you want to form communities, or stress the value of community to students, bring them outside of classrooms *to the communities* in which they live and go to school. Both Katharen Hedges and Savannah Brown talked about their connection to their communities through their writing. Brown says, in her interview, “[We] perform for classes and sometimes going to like, the state capitol performing or it’s, like, a café or any place that is people who have not heard my poetry before.” What is notable about this remark is that my poetry team has been all over Nebraska—making a case for after-school programs at the state capitol, performing in coffee shops, at fundraisers, colleges, for middle schools and high schools who do not yet have poetry slam teams. The writers are advocates for the power of writing, and they go out into the community and make connections. When Katharen Hedges says, “I wanna help out in the community,” so much of that desire comes from actually *being* in the community and, I would argue, from being a competitor in the second largest young poetry festival in the country. Having been named the third best team in the competition in 2013 and the second best team in the 2014 competition, the writers on the team felt the recognition gave them confidence, helped them see they had something to contribute to the *Louder than a Bomb* community, to their schools, and to their local communities.

## SELF-REFLECTION

When I think about the cultivation of writing communities in my college writing classrooms, I try to imagine ways to teach students to be conscious members of intellectual and political communities; however, a widely circulated idea about competition is that it can breed *unconsciousness*, that competitors might do anything to win or get ahead and therefore don’t participate in the kind of

self-reflection or self-implication many writing teachers would agree is at the heart of learning to write *and* learning to be thoughtful, critical, and responsible citizens of the world. I am aware, as I'm writing this, of the unfortunate stereotypes or assumptions about slam poetry—assumptions that go something like this: *slam poetry is expressivism at its worst*. Or that slam poetry is self-indulgent. And maybe it is, but at a great gain for writing, and for political promise:

GO TO VIDEO: SELF-REFLECTION

<http://nelovesps.wistia.com/medias/w8w2d5jcj0>

Katharen Hedges tells us: “It’s like seeing yourself, it’s like you can see yourself there and if you can see yourself then you can do something about who you are. So I think expression is very important . . . very important.” I know it’s a moment to learn from these young writers when they tell me things about their process. I think of the many times I try to push my college students to “see themselves” on the page, the many times I ask them: *who are you when you write this way or when you tell this story?* Good writers, after all, see themselves clearly. And, of course, seeing one’s self clearly is profoundly political. What a different world we might live in if all of us practiced seeing ourselves clearly, seeing our motivations, our identities, our audiences, our actions. But to see ourselves clearly, we need to look in new ways, to try out new methods, new approaches. As Kylah Julch explains about her writing: “I have learned so much about myself I can’t explain. I have done things that I’ve never have . . . that I would not have gotten the opportunity to do before. I’ve performed on so many different stages, I’ve met so many different people. I’ve learned who I am by writing pieces that I would never normally write.” Learning about ourselves through writing is part of self-reflection, and this kind of self-reflection also leads writers to understand the ways they might be implicated in the systems of domination they might want to resist or understand.

In her 2005 article, “Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity” (the article that later developed into her 2009 book *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*), Susan Somers-Willett takes Judith Butler’s lens of performativity to examine some of the issues of self, identity, and embodiment that are at the center of slam. She writes:

I take as my premise that the self is the result of performance, that subjectivities as they are expressed both in the world and on stage (i.e., as performed identities) come into being through social practice. With this view in mind, we must treat the authentic also as a social practice, as something which has no original beyond its own repetition and acceptance over time. (56)

The writers on my team talk a lot with each other about performance and authenticity, particularly about how those ideas are connected to the competition itself. The poets become aware, through repetition of performances and through their discussions of “what gets points” from the judges, that the line between performance and authenticity is barely a line at all. Because of this awareness, they are able to see their poems as both them *and* not them. This makes the scoring bearable. If you thought your poem were actually you, there might be some serious devastation at it getting a 7.9. But if you are aware that your poem/performance is both who you are *and* not who you are, the 7.9 matters a lot less. The poetry slam illuminates these paradoxical truths, ones that

are crucial to producing powerful writing and ones that are integral to being a politically conscious human being in the world. We are bombarded every day with politicians and talking heads who are not able to hold two opposing truths in their minds at the same time. We are in desperate need of writers and thinkers who can do this, so that our vision can become more nuanced, more layered, and more complex. And I have watched these young writers enrich and complicate their visions of themselves and others over and over again over the last three years I have coached them in *Louder than a Bomb*.

The kind of self-reflection and self-implication I am talking about is something that has long concerned me in teaching college courses in writing. I spend many hours trying to help students see the ways self-implication can enrich rather than damage their writing. They often get the message that admitting their biases, their positionality, or their connections to their subjects is not something writers should do because it shows some kind of weakness or tendency to lean in one direction or another. I would argue that this notion that self-implication as weakness is one of the primary ways systems of privilege continue to function as they do. Moreover, the idea that self-implication as weakness is connected to those damaging ways of thinking about competition—especially as it relates to “winning” an argument. To me, the idea of winning an argument is particularly boring and simplistic. After all, if the “argument” is complex, who could win or lose it? It should just keep going.

In teaching composition, in particular first-year composition, we might focus quite a bit of attention on argument. Yet I wonder how self-reflection, community, listening, and play might very well disrupt so many of the conventions that frustrate writing teachers about how students approach and think about the subject of argument. For example, like many composition teachers, I often encourage students to write about subjects they are passionate about or wonder about. This sometimes mean students write essays about issues that are too often represented to us in binary fashion—linear polarized arguments about reproductive rights, the death penalty, or any number of social issues about which people “argue.” If I cannot teach my students self-reflection and self-implication, they will too often reconstruct arguments they have heard elsewhere without considering the positions, identities, privileges, oppressions, or histories that inform those arguments and shape their understandings. The writers on my slam team have modeled for me ways of inviting my students to reconsider the possibilities for “argument.” Katharen Hedges, in 2014, performed a piece about bullying—and her team shared feedback with her that encouraged her to write more about how she is implicated in that subject rather than writing what the team called “an issue poem” that just writes about an issue and sums up its argument: *don't bully*. Here is Katharen's response to that feedback, the final version of her poem “My Apology,” perhaps (at least in my opinion) one of the best poems in the statewide competition this year:

GO TO VIDEO: “MY APOLOGY” BY KATHAREN HEDGES

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=khVLM6mBsXI>

Working with Katharen on this poem made me think more about college essays, about the ways her piece might instruct a college writer in how to write an “argument essay” about bullying—one that might be more circular and complex than a public service announcement. The power of Katharen's

piece lies in her willingness to consider herself, to implicate herself, and to reflect on that implication. What might an essay on bullying that took this approach look like? What arguments would that essay make and how? Is Katharen's concern winning an argument? How did the competitive community she is part of create the conditions under which this poem could emerge? And can I create that kind of community in the college writing classroom?

## LISTENING AND BEING HEARD

In "From the Coffee House to the School House: The Promise and Potential of Spoken Word Poetry in School Contexts," Maisha Fisher describes communities like *Louder than a Bomb* as "Participatory Literacy Communities (PLC's)," and she positions her work in this piece as thinking through PLC's "not as a strategy but as a movement and a way of life for students" (117). In forming these communities, my students transfer their "way of life" as poets on their own team from context to context. Kylah Julch is right that it is a competition and that many young writers "secretly want to win," but at the same time that desire doesn't stop them from listening intently to the poems of the writers they are competing against; it doesn't stop them from rising in a standing ovation to a powerful and vulnerable poem by an opposing team. Both on their team and in this community, writers have developed a practice of listening, becoming more critical and supportive readers and writers.

Krista Ratcliffe, in her book *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*, argues for listening as a primary way to employ a politically conscious rhetorical pedagogy. She writes, "As the performance of a person's conscious choice to assume an open stance in relation to any person, text or culture, rhetorical listening challenges the divided logos of Western civilization—the logos that speaks but does not listen" (26). What if competition or competitiveness as we know it was nuanced with this "open stance," this listening? Might this kind of stance, combined with the community and play I describe earlier transform competition, make it something that might challenge the status quo rather than reinscribe it? Is this possible in more "traditional" classrooms? Certainly, the young writers find this listening stance transformative.

### GO TO VIDEO: LISTENING AND BEING HEARD

<http://nelovesps.wistia.com/medias/kubxwkub42>

Savannah Brown mentions "the way the crowd interacted with the poet, like when they heard a line they all snapped for it or if they really like something they'll just scream and cheer for it and after that I was like: 'That's amazing, like you can actually do that during . . . while people are still saying their poetry.' I loved it. I feel like [ . . . ] the crowd is actually listening to their poetry." I have observed the power of the shared value of the snap, however cheesy one might accuse it of being. It's a powerful sound in a room of 100 people snapping to say they are listening and they are connecting with the poem. Serenity Stokes puts it this way: "it didn't matter if I was scared or if they . . . or if I was scared they wouldn't like me because no matter what you say you're gonna be heard and it's gonna resonate with someone." Additionally, Katharen Hedges remarks:

I think people really do listen to slam poetry, like when you see somebody your age or someone, like, you can really relate to doing something that they're passionate about it's like you have to respect that and it makes you wanna listen because it's almost like as if you were up there doing that it's like you really do feel like they're a lot like you.

Many of the young writers I coach might have thought of "Poetry" initially as something belonging to academia, something out of reach or inaccessible. But the poetry slam has brought them to see the complex intellectual and innovative writing practices in one another and to bridge the gap not just between individual poets but also between "the arts" as they imagined them and *their* art as they perform it. Somers-Willet, in her book *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*, writes, "Even as poets continue to characterize a classic tension between the academy and popular culture, slam poetry might be, in the end, about building bridges, not walls, between these two audiences for poetry" (15). I believe there is a bridge to be built in thinking about competition as something with promise and potential, something that generates rhetorical listening and literacy communities, even as it could, at times, or in the wrong spirit, become the enemy of literacy in certain contexts. Quoting partially from Allan Luke, Michael Apple later concludes, in "Competition, Knowledge, and the Loss of Educational Vision," that "in the long term, we need to 'develop a political project that is both local yet generalizable, systematic without making Eurocentric, masculinist claims to essential and universal truths about human subjects'" (18). This community of young writers might be this kind of "local but generalizable" project—its attention and commitment to play, to community, to self-reflection, and to listening perhaps becomes "systematic" in a way that resists or challenges conventional notions of competition—notions that are, indeed "masculinist" and "Eurocentric." From what I've observed and through the aspects of this competitive community I've outlined here, I believe it is possible to build systems that incorporate competition without erasing or exploiting difference, without reproducing the systems of privilege that make the competition rigged, too meaningful, or too monolithic.

Of course, no community is perfect. No competition is perfect in the same way no particular pedagogy can work for *all* students or in *all* contexts. The young writers on my team sometimes experience disappointment if they don't get to compete on a particular competition night (there are only four spots on any given night). And when I explain to them why, I think back to my own conversation with my father. I think about what it teaches us to see ourselves clearly, to know and honor when someone has done a better job than we have, or perhaps was just a better fit for some specific moment in a competition. I sometimes hear my more conservative family members talking emphatically about how sad it is "these days" that "everyone has to get a trophy." My niece is 10, and they still don't keep score in her soccer games. I'll admit I want to disagree with them—both because it's my gut reaction to do so and because I know it's hard for the young person who doesn't get the trophy (or even that the system doesn't always reward those it should). At the same time, I've seen the ways that competition can enrich lives and writing experiences: my own and those of my students. It is my contention that through play, collaboration, self-reflection, and the cultivation of a listening/speaking community, writers can engage in competitive literacy practices without reifying the very structures that are said to create competition in the first place. After all, here are a few more outcomes

of what our team wrote and performed as part of this competition. It's hard to hear these poems and think their motivation for writing them (partly the hope that coach might put them in the game, and I did) is only a problematic capitalist construction that harms them.

Poem by Katharen Hedges: <http://nelovesps.wistia.com/medias/jqjpyw9g3a>

Poem by Kylah Julch: <http://nelovesps.wistia.com/medias/jj16iqwwxg>

Poem by Serenity Stokes: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yb\\_s\\_-dq7Eg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yb_s_-dq7Eg)

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> While it is, I believe, an important citation practice to refer to student authors by last name when quoting from their work, the young writers on the poetry slam team and I decided that this formality (in the context of both the irreverence of the poetry slam itself and the closeness of my relationship with them as their coach) does not reflect the arguments, writing, or relationships in this article.

## WORKS CITED

- Apple, Michael W. "Competition, Knowledge, and the Loss of Educational Vision." *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 11.1 (2003): 3-22. Print.
- Barrett, Sally Nellson, Dir. "Competition and Play." Nebraska Loves Public Schools, 2013. Film.
- . "Community and Collaboration." Nebraska Loves Public Schools, 2013. Film.
- . "Self-Reflection." Nebraska Loves Public Schools, 2013. Film.
- . "Listening and Being Heard." Nebraska Loves Public Schools, 2013. Film.
- Brown, Rebecca. "Promoting Cooperation and Respect: 'Bad' Poetry Slam in the Nontraditional Classroom." *Pedagogy* 11.3 (2011): 571-77. Print.
- Fisher, Maisha T. "From the Coffee House to the School House: The Promise and Potential of Spoken Word Poetry in School Contexts." *Literocracy: A New Way of Thinking about Literacy*. Spec. issue of *English Education* 37.2 (2005): 115-31. Print.
- Hedges, Katharen. "My Apology." Dir Matt Mason. Nebraska Writers Collective. *Louder than a Bomb Great Plains*, 17 April 2014.
- . "Emily." Dir. Sally Nellson Barrett. Nebraska Loves Public Schools, 2014. Film.
- . "Who Am I Really?" Per. Kyla Julch, Alyssa Geyer, Rachel Vermillion, and Katharen Hedges. Dir. Matt Mason. Nebraska Writers Collective. *Louder than a Bomb Great Plains*, 17 April 2014. Film
- Julch, Kyla. "Learning My Lesson." Dir. Sally Nellson Barrett. Nebraska Loves Public Schools, 2014. Film.
- Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches*. 1994. Berkeley: Crossing, 2007. 110-13. Print.
- Melnikoff, Kirk, and Jennifer Munroe. "Seasoning the Sonnet, Playing Poets: The 'Sonnet Slam' as Extrapedagogical Event." *Pedagogy* 7.2 (2007) 251-57. Print.
- Ratcliffe, Krista. *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2005. Print.
- Somers-Willett, Susan B. A. "Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 38.1 (2005): 51-73. Print.
- . *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2009. Print.
- Stokes, Serenity. "Inheritance." Dir Matt Mason. Nebraska Writers Collective, *Louder than a Bomb Great Plains*, 17 April 2014. Film.
- Weinstein, Susan. "'The Points Are Kind of the Point, But They're Not the Point': The Role of Poetry Slam in Youth Spoken Word." *Contest(ed) Writing: Reconceptualizing Literacy Competitions*. Ed. Mary R. Lamb. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2013: 168-88. Print.
- Why the Arts Matter*. Dir. Sally Nellson Barrett. Nebraska Loves Public Schools, 2013. Film

# Where are the Women?: Rhetoric of Gendered Labor in University Communities

Rachel Riedner    George Washington University

## KEYWORDS

inclusion, access, gendered labor, university community, university discourse

I recently attended a panel of feminist scholars at the Conference of College Composition and Communication entitled “Rhetorical Inquiry to Change Realities: Why Feminist Methods Matter” (Belanger et al.). The question that framed the presentations was “where are the women?” There was considerable discussion from the panel and among audience members about women’s inclusion and equal participation in disciplines, university governance, and university communities, with a particular emphasis on underrepresented fields such as engineering. The discussion emphasized that women, individually and collectively, deserve *access* and *inclusion* to institutional governance and knowledge production in all areas of universities because women are demonstrably valuable members of institutions and systems.

Certainly, inclusion and access are important feminist issues. Inclusion and access have been used as by feminists as keywords, “‘particular formations of meaning’ that provide ‘ways not only of discussing but at another level of seeing many of our central experiences’” (Williams, qtd. in McRuer 6). As keywords used by feminist scholars and activists, access and inclusion can help secure recognition within legal systems and religious organizations, from employers and professional organizations, and within public space and public cultures. However, given the range of women who work at universities, and the close relations and dependencies among differently, and often unequally, situated women, the particular question raised at the panel “where are the women,” with its call for access to academic employment and inclusion in university governance, seems too narrowly focused on women who do intellectual labor, i.e. faculty. At many universities, keywords of access and inclusion are not used to address the range of labor that women do at universities, nor does it address complex relations between differently situated women. While access and inclusion can be strategic keywords, when used only to talk about faculty these keywords insufficiently address the wide range of experiences of women who work in universities, particularly immigrant women of color.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I argue that keywords of access and inclusion need to be situated specifically within the gendered material and structural labor contexts of contemporary universities. To make this argument, I investigate how gendered labor at universities is wound up in citizenship, race, ability, and other social categories. For analysis of differently situated women, and differently recognized women, who work in contemporary universities, arguments for access and inclusion must be

expanded through attention to what Jennifer Nash calls “understudied intersections” (51) between “intimate entanglements between labor, gender, race, citizenship in the current global moment” (57). This essay expands the keywords *inclusion* and *access* by drawing attention to and analyzing the labor of differently situated women in universities. The labor that connects differently situated women—in my example, intersections of gender, race, citizenship, and labor—must be accounted for in order to constitute feminist arguments for inclusion and access effectively. To do this work, I lay out how intellectual labor in a university depends upon on the physical and reproductive labor of women and people of color, even as this gendered and racialized labor is not discursively visible in the conversations about access and inclusion that I opened with.<sup>2</sup> To make this point, I provide an example from the university where I work, George Washington University (GW), located in Washington, DC.

## THICK RELATIONS AND THIN DISCOURSE

My argument for linking discourse about access and inclusion to analysis of labor emerges from a very basic, grounded observation about life and work at George Washington University. At GW, located in downtown Washington, DC, women are professors, students, staff, and administrators. Women are also contracted janitors and subcontracted janitors. Women make and serve food, answer phones, order books, and care for children. Women do gendered, reproductive labor, labor that is associated with women’s reproductive and domestic roles. This labor “reproduce[s] healthy, active human life, on a daily and a generational basis” (Kabeer 28). Faculty, student, and administrators *depend* upon reproductive labor: faculty could not work and live at the university without services such as food preparation, window installation, trash disposal, or bathroom cleaning and maintenance. Intellectual employment is enabled by gendered reproductive labor directly: this is a *thick, direct* economic relationship that sustains the work and life of the *entire* community. However, these thick dependencies are often *thinly* recognized in the feminist discourse that I’ve described.

At GW, gendered labor is predominantly carried out by women (and men) of color. Workers are drawn from the metropolitan area’s long-standing African American communities as well as from more recent migrants to the metropolitan area, usually Latino, African, and Asian women. Women who serve food and clean bathrooms may have unequal access to institutions such as education. If they are not citizens, they have limited access to state support systems and legal systems. They may also come from communities that historically have been exploited and disenfranchised. Thus, thick dependencies, arenas of life where human dependence on others is unrecognized and unavoidable part of everyday life, are constituted by “mutually constructing nature of systems of oppression,” (Collins 153) unequal ideologies, practices, and histories of racism, access to citizenship and literacy which are conjoined to gendered, reproductive labor.

My point is that thick economic dependencies—economic relationships that sustain the work and life of a entire university community—are (unequally) constituted through “understudied intersections” between labor, gender, race, citizenship in the current local context (Nash). In this context, race, gender, citizenship, and other systems of oppression are central to understanding

gendered labor structures and relationships in universities as well as in cities and regions such as Washington, DC.

As Kevin Mahoney and I have argued elsewhere, in universities, women who clean bathrooms and cook in cafeterias are structurally *inside* the university community insofar as their labor reproduces the conditions of education and scholarship for the university community. Simultaneously, women are discursively *outside* insofar as they are not imagined as part of the university community itself (*Democracies to Come*). The decontextualized use of keywords such as inclusion and access that I described earlier does not address women's reproductive labor that sustains, indeed makes possible, intellectual labor.<sup>3</sup> Recognition and analysis of the local relations and structures of gendered labor by women is pointedly absent in such feminist discourse.

At the same time, that thick analysis of gendered labor is absent in some areas of feminist discourse, women's reproductive contributions are not recognized in university discourse. In universities, as in cities such as Washington, DC, reproductive labor that sustains a community is not part of the discursive imagination of people in positions of influence and power in *local* places. University communities are constituted and imagined "on the projection of individual existence into the weft of a collective narrative, on the *recognition* of a common name and on traditions lived" (Wald 52) that weave them into the narrative of belonging. The discourses through which universities are imagined and projected—inherited stories, disciplinary language, classroom conversations, pedagogical documents, news stories, and conference presentations—are thick discourses of recognition and belonging that connect us to those who are similarly situated through our labor. Such discourse does not recognize forms of gendered and racialized reproductive labor that enable a local academic community to live healthy and productive lives. For example, when the university represents itself on its website, it presents photos of students studying and interacting with faculty, graduation celebrations, and other images of interactions between students and faculty. As I will go on to discuss, in the current moment of global capital (or, to put it differently, neoliberal political economy) these discourses do not recognize workers such as immigrant women and women of color in public culture and public life.

## GLOBAL RELATIONSHIPS AND DEPENDENCIES

The GW example enables me to point to a university community that depends upon gendered service labor of women of color. I have argued that gendered labor is thinly visible *locally*. In the daily lives of faculty, students, and administrators who work on campus, gendered reproductive labor is not part of the discourse of belonging to community. Nor is there in dominant discourse any sustained recognition of the dependencies between intellectual and reproductive labor or analysis of the historical formations of formal and informal labor in relation to gender and race. In addition to sustaining local community, gendered labor sustains GW's global identification and reach.

In addition to being a local place where students learn, janitors clean, immigrant laborers install windows, staff manage offices, and faculty teach, GW has a global identification and reach. Because of its centrality to the global economy and global governance, Washington, DC has a

relatively economically stable global location. In this context, it is a hub for a gendered and racialized economy, income-generating activities that are low-paid, often occur outside of state regulation, and are not included in official economic calculations or discourse (Sassen). In the current global economy, cities that are central to the operations of formal economy rely upon women of color and immigrant women (these categories obviously overlap), to supply low-wage labor that is associated with women's domestic roles. As Saskia Sassen argues, informal, service sector work has a particular gendered structure; it is "buil[t] on the backs of women" (179). Immigrant women and women from longstanding minority communities do the labor that is essential for the operation of the global economy and local places in the global economy (180). However, while migrant women supply labor that makes intellectual labor possible, they are not seen as members of university communities. The vocabularies of contemporary globalization do not include low-paid service sector gendered labor.

The university is part of global exchanges that bring students, faculty, and other intellectual workers to Washington, DC from all over the world and that send students and faculty abroad. Research done at GW on economies and social groups is used to make funding decisions by powerful agencies and institutions such as the World Bank and the United Nations as well as non-governmental organizations. Scientific knowledge shapes policy and resource decisions by the US government. Global exchanges of knowledge in a range of fields are directed through university centers and institutes across disciplines and fields. We can call GW a "global university"; a "command point" and center of the global knowledge economy; a key location for production, innovation, and dissemination of ideas, policies, data, and knowledge (Massey, "Geographies," 12-13).

In fact, GW's identification and influence as a global university could not exist without local labor such as food service and trash disposal. As a local place with a global identification, GW depends upon upkeep of campuses and buildings, garbage removal, and clean bathrooms. This reproductive labor and these reproductive laborers make their global identifications and influence possible: faculty, students, and administrators could not travel, study, or cross borders without reproductive labor. To rephrase my earlier point, thick global economic dependencies that sustain the *global* reach and influence of the university are (unequally) constituted through understudied *local* intersections between labor, gender, race, citizenship. In this context, race, gender, citizenship, and other systems of oppression are *central* to understanding how global universities are at the center of the global knowledge economy.<sup>4</sup>

## SHIFTING LOCAL AFFILIATIONS

How can we draw attention to thick, local relations and interdependencies that make the city and the university's global reach and influence possible? In the context of thick gendered and racialized labor relations, how do we create literate practices, reading and writing practices that are used to interpret and evaluate knowledge (Schell and Rawson), that bring to the surface macro-political relations and dependencies? How can we create *obligation*, or what Iris Marion Young calls *political responsibility*, among both local communities and global places? How do we analyze race, class, gender, ability, citizenship, the local relations upon which the university depends as well as the

global relations that sustain universities and cities? How do we shift identification from hegemonic representation of universities to thick, differentiated affinities that link people within a particular place?

It is relatively easy to find examples that mark the absence of women's reproductive labor in local discourse and global discourse: in academic discussions; in administrative communications; in less formal conversations about who matters, whose work is valued, and who is invited to participate in decisions. Universities are often sites in which the economic and political interests of a dominant class are consolidated through practices that shape identities, behaviors, and feelings. Yet universities also include spaces and activities that exceed this hegemonic function (*Democracies to Come*). To expand inclusion and access to understudied intersections between labor, gender, race, and citizenship, it is important to look for discourse and activities where recognition of gendered reproductive labor is active and present (Kabeer, Sudarshan, and Milward). While there are multiple examples of invisibility, there are also examples of cross-cohort recognition and solidarity. Universities put different kinds of workers in contact with each other in locations where relationships develop between people who come into contact with each other through everyday interactions (more on these informal interactions in the next paragraph). Academic institutions, as Chandra Mohanty points out, are "contradictory place[s] where knowledges are colonized but also contested" (*Feminism* 170).

For at least the past fifteen years, a small cohort of workers, students, and faculty at GW have been involved with organizing that builds solidarity across employment categories. This work is informed by relationships built through daily interactions on campus. Food workers and students talk to each other in food courts, and these interactions open up into discussions about daily conditions of work. Faculty and facilities workers interact in office spaces. Over the years, these informal interactions have created conversation and friendship that extend beyond employment categories to solidarity and support.

As one example, in 2010 students in an organization at GW called the Progressive Student Union (PSU) became friendly through informal interactions with food workers. Conversations about working conditions with the workers inspired students and workers to organize breakfasts for janitors, cafeteria workers, faculty, students, and maintenance workers. Many of the GW workers are employed by Sodexo, a company contracted by GW to provide all on-campus food. The backdrop of the breakfasts are working conditions in the student union, the Marvin Center. Some workers are unionized, some are not, and there is a long history of workers being laid off by Sodexo as the company and GW restructure dining services. In the context of poor labor practices, there has also been a long-standing alliance and on-going communication between the PSU and service workers that has been used to activate support for workers.<sup>5</sup> In 2010, the breakfasts were the current form of that alliance. They took place once a week in the student union and were organized as a potluck. According to Paul Seltzer, the idea behind the breakfasts is "to build solidarity through talking." Although these potlucks were not sustained over a long period of time, they are example of students and workers transforming segregated labor categories of student and worker that permeate dominant university culture. Because these relationships are in place, students, faculty, and workers create solidarity around labor disputes. PSU students and faculty have supported a successful unionizing

effort by food service workers on GW's Mt. Vernon campus. This effort involved showing up to public rallies and providing other forms of public, symbolic support for food workers. All of these actions were built through informal, everyday conversations with each other in dining halls where food workers, students, faculty, and staff chat about life and work. In the everyday life of the university, a range of people who work, live, and break bread with each other are part of public life and public culture. As I will go on to argue, these informal, convivial encounters can create alliances of workers, students, faculty, and staff.

The PSU breakfasts are an example of local affiliation and identification, recognition that talking and organizing across discursive, institutional, social, and labor borders is important for solidarity building and worker protection. The breakfasts sustain communication so that workers and students can respond quickly to management tactics. Yet political purchase in the potlucks extends beyond smart union tactics that sustained relationships in order to provide a quick response to immediate labor crises. The potlucks are a discursive and structural space that is not adjudicated by the university. The potlucks are not sponsored by student life employees nor are they officially sanctioned "meetings" either by the union or with management. The potlucks are *outside* the official structures outside lines of authority, and outside GW's identification as a global institution. They are also *inside* the local space of the university (literally, the Marvin Center), and they bring together people whose (different) work and lives are interdependent.

In other words, the institution is the official structure and discourse of the GW community; yet, there are relations and interdependencies that are both within GW and outside official university structure, culture, and discourse. These are interdependencies, identifications, and personal connections that exceed official institutional sanction and recognition. The potlucks imagined community as grounded in recognition of multiple forms of labor and recognition of differently situated subjects who work in universities. The breakfasts are an example of an event and relationship that exceed official structures and official discourses and community that is imagined through its global reach and influence. It is a local strategy that emerges from experiences and realities of a particular group of workers and that responds to the particular discursive and cultural context in which they are located.<sup>6</sup> It involves both concern with working conditions and a concurrent concern with issues of gender-specific constraints that shape working conditions. In other words, as we look to shift and expand the keywords *access* and *inclusion*, as we work to address entanglements between labor, gender, race, and citizenship in the current global moment, and as we act to shift discourse where reproductive labor is absent, we can build from informal, convivial encounters that can create alliances of workers, students, faculty, and staff.

Many of the students who organized the breakfasts study in departments and take classes whose curriculum emphasize what Mohanty calls "counterhegemonic pedagogies" (204), classroom practices, interactions, relationships, discourse and research that seek to shift common sense ideologies of gender, race, and difference through analysis of lived experience and local structures in relation to historical analysis and analysis of larger relations of capitalist political economy (204). PSU students are familiar with interdisciplinary scholarship that argues for responsibility from membership of local and national community for globalized labor. Iris Marion Young argues for

responsibility from membership in local and national community to responsibility for globalized labor. In Young's argument, labor connects people to each other even though these connections might not be visible. She argues for political responsibility that would be derived from acknowledgement of how different forms of labor sustain life across local and global places. Her notion of political responsibility makes thick local and global relations visible: "political responsibilities derive . . . not from the contingent fact of membership in common political institutions . . . [They] derive from the social and economic structures in which they act and mutually affect one another" (Young, "Responsibility" 376). Young's work suggests that community can be imagined and constituted by a collective narrative that recognizes intellectual and manual labor that sustain each other.<sup>7</sup> In other words, within GW, there are experiences, pedagogies, curriculum, and relationships that are not shaped by dominant university narrative. Students and workers have drawn upon multiple forms of knowledge to shape relationships that emerge from social and economic structures. Their activities and their knowledge demonstrate "the possibility of counterhegemonic discourse and oppositional analytic spaces within the institution" (Mohanty 198).

As I have discussed, universities are complex, differentiated relations and interdependencies among local and global (gendered, racialized) workers. In this framework, the PSU and service workers, many of whom are women, suggest space for critical conversation and convivial collaboration across employment categories, citizenship, class, and gender and racial identifications. The potlucks are an opportunity to call into question labor structures and discursive practices that are fraught with labor, race, gender, and citizenship. They can provide "bottom up" literacies for recognizing those who are overlooked, invisible, or simply forgotten in the constitution of community, in this case because reproductive labor is invisible in an academic community (Kabeer, Sudarshan, and Milward 45). Building from on-the-ground examples from student, faculty, and worker collaboration, the keywords *access* and *inclusion* can be recast by looking at spaces where knowledges are contested. Instead of "where are the women," we might ask "who is working?," "what work are women doing?," "what are the conditions of their work?," and "what is the relationship between the labor that women are doing and social categories that shape their experience?" These questions have been used locally to build solidarity and support. At the very least, past and current alliances of students and workers demonstrate that the thin use of inclusion and access in scholarly settings and in dominant discourse that I have described and the invisibility of reproductive laborers is not inevitable. Thin discourse and gendered and racialized employment structures can be addressed, identifications with different places and people within the local and across the global can be created, vocabularies can be expanded, and identifications and structures can be intervened in. The move now is to explore understudied global intersections between labor, gender, race, and citizenship and to build solidarities that address globalized inequalities, expanding our inquiry to "how does this labor support university's global influence and identification?"

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A critique of feminism and feminist scholarship not engaging in analysis of gender in relation to race, class, and other social categories emerged in the late 1980's from women of color feminism and postcolonial feminism. It has continued recently in the work of intersectional feminists who explore the linkages between gender and other social categories such as race, class, and ability. For earlier work, see Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Chandra Mohanty, and Kimberlee Crenshaw as representative examples. For more recent scholarship, see Jennifer Nash.

<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, I have addressed subcontracted work of male immigrants in universities and the vulnerability their work status creates. See "Nascent Collectivities: Transnational Abandonment, I: <http://www.womeninandbeyond.org/?p=692>. While this essay focuses on reproductive labor done by women, an extended analysis could look more closely at labor done by men of color, particularly immigrant men of color. I would also point readers to Saskia Sassen's *Cities in a World Economy* that argues that the current structure and practice of globalization largely relies upon migration of female workers who can fill low-wage jobs (178-179).

<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, as Jennifer Nash has recently argued, women of color's experiences are not subjects of the current moment, not considered part of public culture and public life. In this context, vocabulary about women defaults to white, middle class women's experiences.

<sup>4</sup> Feminist scholars have argued for about thirty years that gender, race, sexuality, and other social categories are central to understanding how capitalist economy works. In these arguments, capitalist economies work through social relations and inequalities, using these divisions to organize labor and structure the extraction of surplus value. Thus, social inequalities are central to analysis of capitalist political economy. See the work of Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Mohanty, Cynthia Enloe, Maria Mies, M. Jacqui Alexander, Grace Hong, and many others for elaborations of this argument.

<sup>5</sup> In 2004, I wrote about another moment in the PSU/service worker solidarity where students camped out in the Marvin Center in support of workers. The university called the DC police, and students were arrested for trespassing although all charges against them were later dropped. See "Strategies of Containment" *The Minnesota Review* 61-62 (Spring 2004): 233-237.

<sup>6</sup> My analysis of the potlucks is not intended to suggest an organizing strategy that could have a universal application. Rather, my work suggests that organizing will have a "strong local dimension" and is best framed in relation to local contexts that takes into account the relationship between this local place and its global identification and reach (Kabeer, Sudarshan, and Milward 41).

<sup>7</sup> In addition, students are familiar with organizing strategies that are based on knowledge of local context and analysis of larger global context that the local is shaped through (Kabeer; Sassen), with intersectional analysis that investigates how social categories of gender, race, and class are intimately tied to each other (Collins; Crenshaw; Nash), and with research that shows how bodies that are read through social scripts of gender, class, race, and other social categories are associated with underpaid and undervalued labor (Mcruer; Mohanty; Spivak).

WORKS CITED

- Belanger, Kelly, Diana George, Beverly Moss, Katrina Powell, and Shirley Logan Wilson. "Rhetorical Inquiry to Change Realities: Why Feminist Methods Matter." Conference of College Composition and Communication. Hilton Hotel, New Orleans. 3 April 2008. Conference Presentation.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1998. Print. Contradictions 7.
- Kabeer, Nalia. *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*. London: Verso, 1994. Print.
- Kabeer, Naila, Ratna Sudarshan, and Kirsty Milward. *Organizing Women Workers in the Informal Economy: Beyond the Weapons of the Weak*. London: Zed, 2013. Print.
- Massey, Doreen. "Geographies of Responsibility." *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 86.1 (2004): 5-18. Print.
- McRuer, Robert. "Taking it to the Bank: Independence and Inclusion on the World Market." *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 1.2 (2007): 5-17. Print.
- Mohanty, Chandra. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. Print.
- Riedner, Rachel and Kevin Mahoney. *Democracies to Come: Rhetorical Action, Neoliberalism, Communities of Resistance*. Lanham: Lexington, 2008. Print. Cultural Studies/Pedagogies/Activism.
- Sassen, Saskia. *Cities in a World Economy*. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge, 2006. Print. Sociology for a New Century.
- Schell, Eileen and K.J. Rawson. *Rhetorica in Motion: Feminist Rhetorical Methods and Methodologies*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2010. Print. Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture.
- Wald, Patricia. *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*. Durham: Duke UP 2008. Print. John Hope Franklin Center.
- Young, Iris. "From Guilt to Solidarity: Sweatshops and Political Responsibility." *Dissent* 50.2 (2003): 39-44. Print.
- Young, Iris Marion (see also Young, Iris). "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice." *The Journal of Political Philosophy*. 12.4 (2004): 365-88. Print.

# Performing Horizontal Activism: Expanding Academic Labor Advocacy Throughout and Beyond a Three-Step Process

Vani Kannan Syracuse University<sup>1</sup>  
Joe Schicke Tulsa Community College  
Sue Doe Colorado State University

## KEYWORDS

organic theater, academic labor, performative activism

**I**n Adrianna Kezar's edited collection *Embracing Non-Tenure Track Faculty: Changing Campuses for the New Faculty Majority* she cites several campuses as case studies of what she posits as three fundamental phases of adjunct advocacy and integration: mobilization (phase one), implementation (phase two) and institutionalization (phase three). Kezar suggests that movement from phase one to phase three is accomplished through a range of mechanisms including governance, executive caveat, outside expert or consultant recommendation, unionization, and activism.

Our experience suggests that this model is useful for understanding the status of equity efforts, but that grassroots perturbation is necessary to move through each of these stages. In this article, we put Kezar's model into conversation with a call from Maria Maisto, President and Executive Director of the New Faculty Majority (NFM), for greater utilization of the arts in the academic labor movement: "Advocacy for adjuncts and their students needs to be carried out using all of the communicative tools we have: the full range of media, rhetorics, and art forms that can convey the humanity at the core of the issue." Specifically, we share our experience enacting academic labor activism through organic theater, a performative organizing tactic that can be used to build community horizontally within rehearsal and performance spaces while productively linking academic labor equity with other local and regional organizing efforts.

Our experience suggests that organic theater can be used during any of Kezar's stages to complement and excite traditional approaches such as surveying faculty, developing professional association position/policy statements, and increasing non tenure-track faculty participation in shared governance. We believe that performative interventions like organic theater complement Kezar's Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success, which provides tools by which institutions can undertake systematic analysis and improvement of labor policies, and build more inclusive environments within the academy. With Maisto, we believe that creativity and artistry can stand alongside statistics, data, and other empirical approaches, make both theoretical and tactical

contributions to the existing advocacy repertoire, and allow those most affected by contingency to have a voice in its public de-authorization and dismantlement.

## THE ROMERO TROUPE'S ORGANIC THEATER

In order to put Kezar's three-step process into conversation with Maisto's call for performative interventions in the academic labor movement, we turn to a local, horizontal organizing tactic called organic theater. An unpolished, emergent form of stage production, organic theater was developed by Denver's Romero Theater Troupe, an all-volunteer group that describes its work as "social justice through organic theater." Troupe founder Jim Walsh, a senior instructor of political science at the University of Colorado at Denver, describes organic theater as a "beautiful, sometimes messy, method" in which theater is created through "a collective process and a consensus model." Although Walsh coordinates many of the Troupe's appearances, there is not one designated "director" or "playwright," and the Troupe relies instead on a horizontal structure. Most of the Troupe members have no formal acting experience, and their performances are often affiliated with local organizing efforts.<sup>2</sup>

One such effort inspired our play. During the fall of 2012, a group of custodians at Denver's Auraria campus reached out to the Romero Troupe<sup>3</sup> to ask them to facilitate a performance of the custodians' workplace struggles. The custodians were working with the organization Colorado WINS,<sup>4</sup> and hoped to galvanize campus and community support for their organizing effort.<sup>5</sup> At their performance at Denver's Auraria campus, faculty, staff, students, and community members were brought face to face with the custodians' everyday work experiences and were compelled to consider their own complicity in the custodians' exploitation. Indeed, it was the excruciating banality of the scenes depicted—a supervisor screaming at a custodian, a human resource representative handing out English-only contracts to Spanish-speaking employees, a student refusing to lift his legs to allow a custodian to roll a trash can down a hallway—that made the experience of viewing the play uncomfortable, at times even unbearable. Dramatic theory suggests that this spectator discomfort serves a rhetorical function, transcending simple identification with characters in the play in favor of defamiliarizing the familiar<sup>6</sup> and revealing the injustices hidden in everyday events. Augusto Boal, author of *Theater of the Oppressed*, connects this discomfort to the act of the human being "obser[ving] itself" and "see[ing] itself seeing" (qtd. in Linds 114).

Approaching the performance as rhetoricians, rather than dramatists, led us to focus on the play's rhetorical possibilities, particularly the fact that the play asked audience members—the majority of whom were students or teachers—to see themselves as complicit in the custodians' working conditions. Viewing quietly, audience members were asked to respectfully absorb the magnitude of the events, the dignity of the people who had endured them, and consider how they might support the custodians. Following the performance, three new members joined the union, and students, faculty, and staff came together to stage an on-campus solidarity demonstration. We were also struck that the performance defined academic labor outside the confines of solely teaching and suggested the potential for solidarity across university labor tiers.<sup>7</sup> The custodians' play demanded that those of us involved in academic labor organizing draw attention to the interconnectedness of contingent

employment and the ways in which contingency is experienced differently across race, class, and gender.

It also demanded that we build a process for working through the internal struggles of workplace organizing—a process that was visible in the narrative arc of several of the custodians’ scenes. For example, one custodian staged the way she overcame her fear of joining the union as she witnessed injustices faced by her colleagues. This evolution demonstrated that internal education about each others’ workplace struggles is as, if not more, important than persuading workers to join a union or other advocacy organization. The custodians’ play also offered an opportunity to educate a campus audience in what it means to be an ally; in another scene, a student persuaded a fellow classmate to make room for a custodian pushing a cart down a hallway.

The custodians’ performance showcased the potential of theater to simultaneously engage internal capacity-building and external coalition-building. We decided to implement a similar organizing strategy at the campuses where we teach and work—Colorado State University and Front Range Community College (CSU/FRCC).

## ADAPTING ORGANIC THEATER

In sharing the process of putting together this performance, we do not claim to define a reproducible organizing framework, but rather to share one possible way of linking Kezar’s model with Maisto’s call for performative activism. While writing about activist theater in this way risks “delimit[ing] the underlying generative power of the work itself” by suggesting that readers should “replicate what ‘worked’ in one context into another” (Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman 1), we return to Kezar’s model to consider the importance of recognizing the differing statuses of advocacy of varying campuses, and adapting performative activism accordingly.

The Romero Troupe’s organic theater—which, although it sometimes begins with loosely scripted scenes, prioritizes off-the-script improvisation—was adapted in several important ways to suit the needs of our local productions. In the custodians’ play, storytelling workshops gave way to loosely-framed scenes, but these scenes were largely improvised, even on performance day. Our play at CSU/FRCC, however, relied heavily on pre-scripted scenes due to the fact that we were new to organic theater and had just begun to develop trust among participants. Given the high turnover among both GTAs and NTTF, creating a stable and tight-knit group of actor-organizers will doubtless be a continued challenge. There were, however, some important elements of organic theater that we retained in our plays on campus, particularly the emphasis on a transformative rather than contemplative understanding of performance (Schaedler 141) that aimed to engage audiences in academic labor organizing, and the use of scenes to stage conversations that happen in the “theater of real life” (Boal, qtd. in Schaedler 142).

To put together the play, over the span of one year, we began with localized coalition-building at CSU and FRCC. We identified non-tenure-track faculty, tenure-track faculty, graduate teaching assistants, and part-time and full time faculty who were involved in local advocacy efforts, and held preliminary meetings; then, we put out a broad call for participants via Facebook.<sup>8</sup> We met every 1-2

weeks to write collaboratively and rehearse emergent scenes and monologues, followed by periods in between these rehearsals when participants would edit their individual monologues and scenes. These scenes were then merged via Google Docs to form a meaningfully sequenced narrative.

Preliminary scenes were developed by drawing on Theater of the Oppressed exercises, such as “the machine,” in early rehearsals to get a sense of how each participant positioned him- or herself in the “machine” of the university. After a few early rehearsals, a former adjunct instructor showed up at rehearsal with a short monologue about his struggles on the job; this inspired other participants to draft monologues articulating their own stories, from internalized narratives of “white-collar work” to family financial obligations. These monologues offered an opportunity for individual participants to situate their individual struggles with contingent employment within the context of their students’ and colleagues’ struggles, and connect those struggles to national trends. Out of these connections, we ended up titling the play “Contingency: A Crisis of Teaching and Learning.” The monologue approach allowed participants to confront and externalize the struggles that prevent them from speaking out about their working conditions, simultaneously functioning as “a vehicle for organizing and as an integral component to the organizing process itself” (Picher 88).

Rehearsals allowed the time and space to educate each other about organizing tactics and, in many cases, re-evaluate the efficacy of those tactics, working towards a capacity for participation that integrated the personal, the aesthetic, the pedagogical, and the political (Cohen-Cruz 103; Picher 80, 88). For example, in developing scenes about NTTF’s fear of speaking out about their labor conditions, we revealed persuasion strategies that were not effective (such as stressing the need for full-time jobs, when not all NTTF actually want them) and developed new approaches (e.g. shifting away from invoking the part-time/full-time divide and instead emphasizing the need for pay equity). This shift also drew attention to the fact that many designated “part-time” employees actually work far more than 40 hours per week.

We “piloted” the play on a day locally deemed New Faculty Majority Day in April 2013; that fall, after another composing and rehearsing process (which also saw new individuals added to the production), we performed during national celebrations of Campus Equity Week at CSU and FRCC. After each performance, we facilitated an audience Q&A, conducted an exit survey to assess responses beyond those vocalized, gathered an e-mail list of those who wanted to get involved as actors and/or activists, and edited video footage for YouTube.<sup>9</sup> After the two performances that yielded a higher turnout than previous Campus Equity Week events (which included keynote speeches by national leaders in the academic labor movement), we adapted an hour-long segment of the play to be performed in a local grange hall alongside the Romero Troupe’s new play, *Semillas de Colorado: Stories from the Struggle*.<sup>10</sup> In this context, stories of academic labor were set alongside stories of Colorado activism around police brutality, deportation, gentrification, and imprisonment—a broader context that allowed participants and audiences to identify threads of injustice (economic, political, class, gender, and race). This context also showcased several scenes and monologues focusing on the impact that community members can have on education politics. For example, one of the monologues recounted a play participant’s grandmother’s advocacy for elementary school students in Florida, emphasizing “community responsibility” for education conditions. Following

our first joint performance, the Romero Troupe re-titled their play *An Adjunct in Ludlow*, thus linking adjunct labor issues (depicted in framing scenes) to historical labor struggles in Colorado including the Ludlow Massacre, and performed for a packed house in Denver.

The Romero Troupe often invites audience members on stage during its performances; in Theater of the Oppressed work, too, audience members are invited to step into the play and shape the dramatic action. Because we knew audience members might not want to be “outed” as labor activists, we chose to engage audience members collectively. For example, at each campus performance, we asked the audience to take a mock “midterm exam” where they were asked to identify local and national academic labor activists and advocates. At the grange hall performance, we staged a scene that depicted an adjunct reluctant to join the organizing effort, and as the scene ended, she turned to the audience and asked them to stand if they had ever been afraid to speak up in a workplace out of fear of losing their job. As she stood in front of the room, she remarked, “This is what solidarity can look like—many people who are scared standing together.”

These performances, facilitated by the horizontal, broadening base of concerned and implicated actor-workers, brought together different activist communities in northern Colorado and facilitated coalition-building among various local and regional organizing efforts. We want to elaborate on the lessons learned from the coalition-building among four-year and community college academic labor activists, which demonstrate the unique affordances of performative activism as it relates to Kezar’s three stages.

## BRIDGING THE FOUR-YEAR/COMMUNITY COLLEGE DIVIDE

The rhetorical situations of the campuses of CSU and FRCC, separated physically by less than five miles but separated philosophically and administratively by substantially different modes of governance, nonetheless shared similar concerns around contingent academic labor. The status of each campus in terms of Kezar’s model of integration was substantially different. Similar concerns and differing positions thus provided context and exigency for a type of cross-campus advocacy that was new to the local setting. Yet the challenge remained of how to bridge the two worlds of a community college and a four-year Research I institution. Organic theater provided a mechanism for undertaking the democratic conversations that ensued across this historically deep divide, united under the shared condition of contingency.

This approach was of particular interest to academic labor organizers at CSU because of the fresh take that it represented. Advocacy at CSU had reached a kind of maturity, perhaps even Kezar’s third stage, “institutionalization,” after more than a decade of collecting data, undertaking surveys, contextualizing the local situation within national trends, and making a case for non-tenure-track faculty (NTTF) inclusion in shared governance, salary exercises, and other mainstream functions. “Institutionalization” here does not imply an end state, but simply suggests that it is no longer possible for an institution to continue with business as usual and exclude adjunct voices. At CSU, arguments in favor of institutionalization, which were firmly embedded within the institutional logic of the

university, had succeeded on many fronts. An elected official, state representative Randy Fischer, had been persuaded to carry a piece of legislation that lifted legal barriers to multi-year teaching contracts, an achievement that had been unimaginable just a few years earlier. Even the President of CSU, Tony Frank, had enthusiastically declared 2013-14 “the year of the adjunct.” However, despite pay raises, job reclassifications, and improved working conditions, problems remained, such as gross inequities in pay, exclusion from voting rights on Faculty Council, and the absence of non-tenure-track career trajectories. It sometimes seemed that administrators had grown self-satisfied, and activists had grown weary.

Meanwhile, at FRCC, the extreme transience of the workforce had created a pattern where advocacy efforts had periodically developed and faded away. Still, adjuncts from the Fort Collins campus were “re-organizing,” talking with administrators, working with the Denver campus of FRCC to create a new chapter of the AAUP (American Association of University Professors), and working with Representative Randy Fischer to carry another bill, this one focused on the substantial pay inequities of community college faculty on part-time appointments. However, at the institutional level, efforts at adjunct advocacy and integration (the forming of an institutionally recognized adjunct group) were still in their infancy, or arguably somewhere in Kezar’s “mobilization” phase.

While the mobilization phase can be an exciting and active time, we have found that the institutionalization phase, as experienced on the CSU campus, can lead to complacency and an absence of vigilance. A university can tell itself that “we addressed the problem” and declare the problems resolved, the situation over. At CSU, performance thus served as a way to mobilize during the period of *post*-institutionalization. While institutionalization had yielded increased stature and respect for faculty off the tenure track, it was becoming clear that it would take decades for NTTF to feel truly enfranchised, much less valued and respected. They were not yet, after all, compensated fairly; they were still barred from full representation on Faculty Senate/Council, and they were still perceived in many circles as a sub-professional academic labor class that threatened tenure. In other words, not even institutionalization could right all the wrongs. Organic theater, in dramatizing these issues, emerged as a way of revealing the injustices and constraints that remained, reminding faculty and administrators that the process of institutional change is an ongoing one.

The situation at FRCC was different, but the performance was equally relevant. The transience of the workforce, the relative dearth of shared governance, and the resulting lack of grievance procedures and due process for contingent employees had made institutionalization efforts seem somewhat hopeless. However, several months after the play was performed at FRCC, the college began officially recognizing the Campus Instructor Committee (CIC) by offering paid positions for board members and a stronger voice in faculty governance. The CIC, in turn, served as a way for advocates to find each other, leading to off campus gatherings, membership in the FRCC chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the New Faculty Majority (NFM), and participation in the play, with the play offering a unique opportunity to extend advocacy efforts into other social justice movements through collaboration with CSU employees and the Romero Troupe.

Performative activism thus offered an alternative to the logos-driven arguments that dominated

the push towards institutionalization at both campuses. Furthermore, because the performance sought to break down the entrenched divides between academic labor tiers, it “argued” in a way that countered the hierarchically-embedded arguments of traditional campus advocacy, opening up the possibilities for movement throughout and beyond Kezar’s sequence of adjunct integration. This resulted from laying bare the arguments we have all heard within the university and juxtaposing them against the lived reality of academic workers. For example, activists might have heard the following:

Arguing that higher pay will lead to increased retention of talented instructors?  
Administration would love to pay instructors more but the state keeps reducing funding for higher education. Want to criticize the system’s general over reliance on part-time labor?  
It’s the adjuncts’ fault for basing a career on the unrealistic expectations of part time college instruction.

In a traditional, institutionalized context, we might respond to this argument by shifting the burden of responsibility (*administrations must be held accountable for the de-professionalized work of college instruction*), a claim that is easily ignored. However, within the context of a performance, the goal is not to “win” arguments, but to stage workers’ lived experiences and provide space for conversation and community building, goals that are crucial for the survival of academic labor advocacy efforts.

For example, one scene portrayed an adjunct explaining to a student that he is not able to discuss the student’s paper with her after class because not only does he not have an office, but he has to rush across town to get to his other job. In this scene, audience members were shown the complicated human dimensions of slogans like “teaching conditions are learning conditions”: the difficulty of the student who simply wants to get some help from her professor, but also the difficulty of the adjunct instructor who works as a “freeway flyer” and wants to serve his students the best he can in an environment where he is not valued or supported. Traditional institutional arguments regarding this freeway flyer’s dilemma, on the other hand, might focus on the cost savings associated with keeping contingent faculty below the Affordable Care Act’s mandatory coverage threshold (30 hours) or the effect upon retention numbers when undergraduates do not have ready access to faculty assistance.

Thus, storytelling became activism, and art became an implicit argument that attempted to fill in the cracks between those “rational” arguments and positioned contingent employees in proactive subject-positions (Cohen-Cruz 103). Throughout the rehearsal and composition process, we wondered, *how, exactly, do these stories serve as a call to action? Or is the work of the play more of a performance of solidarity, a suggestion of what it might look like to stand together across rank—something that cannot be easily quantified in the language of “argument”?* This approach might be criticized for enacting the tyranny of experience, but we tried to tamp down any claim of unassailable personal storytelling by having multiple, even conflicting, stories and by layering those stories alongside empirical data that one would expect to see in “institutional” arguments (which appeared on a Prezi and complemented each scene or monologue). These stories were layered alongside ever starker examples of civil and human rights violations when we performed *An Adjunct at Ludlow* alongside the Romero Troupe’s stories of police brutality, deportation, and imprisonment—a juxtaposition of stories that demanded that participants articulate the broader economic conditions

that lead to contingency, exploitation, and violence.

## MEETING AND TRANSFORMING CONSTRAINTS

While this process of forging local and regional coalitions and speaking collectively about workplace injustice was important for the participants involved, it was not easy or simple. One of the key constraints in developing this consciousness around labor, we found, was the neoliberal individualization of both the problem and the solution. Widely circulated narratives around the individual's responsibility for job and life satisfaction are part of what Dana Cloud describes as "therapeutic rhetorics," which direct citizens toward seeing political-economic inequities as personal failures subject to personal remedy. Such rhetorics of personal rather than structural responsibility are, Cloud argues, "A political strategy of contemporary capitalism, by which potential dissent is contained within a discourse of individual or family responsibility" (xv). In contrast, an organic theater production brings the individual's suffering into context, setting it alongside that of others and redirecting responsibility toward the structures and policies creating it. Such an approach is consistent with Cloud's argument that the ubiquitous deployments of rhetorics of therapy protect organizations while pathologizing workers.

Although denaturalizing these therapeutic rhetorics is essential work, it is also exhausting. Much of the "work" of putting together the play was affective as well as rhetorical. Would the performers experience negative blowback from administrations? How would we frame our individual stories within larger economic trends in order to mitigate this fear? How could we identify and articulate the overlaps between K-12, GTA, adjunct, and tenured concerns without erasing power dynamics? How could we responsibly connect the privileged position of the faculty member to the situation of the custodian and other marginalized workers? How could we add humor to the equation to engage audiences without depressing or alienating them?

Several other constraints made (and will continue to make) it difficult to address these questions and maintain horizontal organizing spaces across these significant contextual differences. Time was one major constraint. Given more time to work on the play, we could have created more skits (instead of relying mainly on monologues) that "enacted" patterns of exploitation. The fact that the final play was monologue-heavy may even indicate form-reflecting-content, given how isolated we are from each other in the workplace; it was difficult, if not impossible, to identify shared "scenes" that we could enact. This constraint did teach us a valuable lesson that reflects Boal's argument that "oppression exists when a dialogue becomes a monologue" (qtd. in Schaedler 143), and necessitated that we use the space of theater rehearsals to name this shared sense of isolation, finding ways of connecting that did not focus on our frustrations with students and colleagues,<sup>11</sup> but rather on the link between working conditions and learning conditions in education writ large. This process suggests that making spaces to collaboratively deconstruct workplace alienation is essential to academic labor organizing, particularly if we wish to grow towards the Romero Troupe's more improvisational and "organic" aesthetic. Ultimately, the monologue structure allowed participants to articulate issues that intersect with contingent employment, including mental health struggles and environmental

justice—links that we hope will be enacted in scenes of future productions.

Another linked constraint had to do with the lack of participating adjuncts (for a variety of reasons that included fear of reprisal, a further demand of precious time, and a sense of powerlessness), and the overreliance on GTAs to fill the roles, a constraint in itself in that GTAs, while more willing to participate, not only had limited personal knowledge of adjuncting but would be graduating and moving on soon, hence reducing their immediate stake in the conversation. The GTAs' position as contingent employees who (for the most part) had only a two-year commitment to the institution, however, did allow them to participate with less fear of reprisal than the NTTF who hoped to teach at CSU/FRCC for years to come.

Internalized narratives about so-called “psychic income,” to use a phrase first documented by Alice Gillam (48) and later popularized by Eileen Schell (40), were another constraint in addressing critical questions. Because many NTTF (and indeed, most workers in 2014) report feeling lucky to have a job at all—let alone one that they find rewarding—they may feel reluctant to critique their working conditions. In the play, this issue is addressed as the “labor of love” fallacy—a notion that we denaturalize in order to suggest that the “I am not worthy” narrative must be confronted and revised. For example, one monologue features an adjunct instructor at CSU staging an internal debate that she has every day at work, where she juxtaposes the material conditions of her work with its interpersonal rewards, posing the question, *why do they do it?* By making this debate public, she was able to both reveal and deconstruct the way the labor of love fallacy individualizes and silences workplace struggles, resonating with Boal's definition of social alienation as internalized oppression, which he termed “Cops-in-our-Heads” (Popen 125).

While tiered labor conditions could also be viewed as a constraint, this ultimately necessitated that we work through microaggressions typical in the academic workplace, and that we perform our complicity in each others' exploitation (as well as our own). For example, the play included an exchange between a GTA and an adjunct, where the adjunct calls out the GTA for criticizing tenured faculty; this served as a moment to educate our academic audiences about the administrative pressures on tenured faculty, and allowed us to define both NTTF and tenured faculty overwork as linked effects of public divestment from higher education. This scene grew out of an actual exchange within a rehearsal and represented the type of education we gave each other as we put together the play.<sup>12</sup>

While we anticipated audience backlash given the dominant narratives (“therapeutic rhetorics” and “psychic income”) that surround academic labor exploitation, as well as Colorado's conservative labor politics, the Q&A sessions and exit surveys suggested our audiences' generosity and willingness to engage in the idea exchange that we imagined ourselves part of. Including the audience in our philosophy of “common cause” across rank led to some important moments, as when Rep. Randy Fischer, co-sponsor of HB 14-1154, which called for the state's community colleges to “maintain only one salary and compensation schedule...for all faculty,” was clearly moved by the performance and spoke passionately at the end and in support of the play's effect on him. Although Fischer's attendance and support is not enough in itself to change policy, it does suggest a political audience capable of effecting change. Students, too, expressed a desire to work for labor justice on campus: as

we fielded their questions, it became clear to us that future work must carve out spaces that actively engage students in questions of contingency to build alliances between NTTF and students. The Q&A sessions thus revealed potential solidarities, and also opened up space to consider the work that still needed to be done.

## HORIZONTAL ACTIVISM GOING FORWARD: PERFORMANCES TO COME

Horizontal organizing and performance continues to suggest new possibilities to us, and has led us to question where (or whether) our activity might be placed on Kezar's continuum of reform. When using her three-phase concept as a theoretical lens, we found that these efforts complicate a linear, institutionally led plan of adjunct advocacy and integration. As a result, we began to think of our activity as a grassroots approach that can facilitate collective action at any stage of reform. Within the literature of academic labor activism, there are two key new ideas here: the larger social justice connections that are forged by a horizontal approach, and a newly "deployable" form of academic labor advocacy approach that is offered by performance art. There is also a kind of synthetic multiplier effect that derives from these two features—the horizontality alongside the performativity. Participants not only gain wider understanding of how their issues connect by virtue of the horizontal approach, but they engage in critical literacy building and coalition-building as contingency is understood to be a condition shared by a wide group of people with interrelated challenges. Through the performance, we were able to understand and present ourselves as a group that might be described as a "precariat," perpetually contingent—whether on classroom enrollments, on state budgets, on immigration papers, or on translators—and discernible to ourselves and to others.

None of this was easy—not for us as organizer-actors nor for other community actors, and certainly not for our audience members, who were deliberately implicated in the injustices shared on stage. Yet our experience suggests that this is productive tension, one that combats complacency. Since change may in time serve little more than the hegemony it once challenged, a central problem for faculty labor and community activists alike is the need to maintain a posture of vigilance, to remain relevant and responsive to emerging needs and issues, to keep moving forward through phases of advocacy and integration, as suggested by Kezar's model. We believe that horizontal, community-based composing and performing practices, such as those offered by organic theater, offer an ongoing kind of promise. Such approaches are "productive" in the sense that they convey a great deal of information to interested and implicated parties while also empowering participants to contextualize their own experience and raise the level of discourse from the local and experiential to the national/international and conceptual/theoretical. They offer not only a window into the lived experiences of those who are marginalized but also a vehicle for those who are marginalized to become more direct contributors to the conversations that impact them.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> When the three of us collaborated on this theater project, Vani was a graduate student in rhetoric and composition and teaching assistant at CSU, Joe (who had recently graduated from CSU's rhet/comp program) was teaching as a part-time instructor at Fort Range Community College, and Sue was an Assistant Professor of English at CSU.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the Troupe was born when Walsh—himself a NTTF—began pushing against the bounds of standardized curricula within his classroom by using theater to teach history, resulting in administrative pushback (and nearly losing his job) (personal communication, August 1, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Vani was involved in organizing the composition and performance of the play.

<sup>4</sup> Workers for Innovative and New Solutions, which is affiliated with AFSCME, the Teachers, and the Service Employees.

<sup>5</sup> See Pickett, “Denver Custodians Rehearse Resistance Onstage.”

<sup>6</sup> Bertolt Brecht terms this the “alienation effect” (91, 95).

<sup>7</sup> This is related, in a sense, to The Metro Strategy, which creates large collective bargaining units across institutions so that a campus on one side of town is less likely to undermine another's organizing efforts in a different part of town (Schmidt). This approach draws on the long history of alternative organizing that has replaced the classical organizing of the 1930s-60s, bearing some resemblance to the Coordinated/Pooled Resource Strategy, as defined by Craft and Exeijt, in which varied unions join forces to coordinate efforts and increase efficiency, conserve resources, and enlarge community support (25).

<sup>8</sup> Nearly all of the participants were women who taught first-year writing as GTAs or NTTF, reflecting the gendered and contingent nature of composition instruction. Because CSU's composition department had adopted an “Ethics in Higher Education” theme for the academic year, many GTAs discussed contingent employment with their composition classes during Campus Equity Week, and/or invited their students to the play. A separate study revealed that because of their contingent labor conditions, many GTAs did not feel safe discussing these issues explicitly in the classroom; however, they did feel comfortable offering their students extra credit to attend Campus Equity Week events like the play.

<sup>9</sup> Given the complex and differing institutional contexts, safety became an especially important feature of the work of the play's participants. Some participants asked us to edit them out of the video since their stories were quite personal and they were concerned about both threats to their privacy and the potential for employer retribution. We honored their requests and also vowed to work such concerns into future productions.

<sup>10</sup> At both locations we filled the auditoriums, which seated around 80; our community performance drew over 100.

<sup>11</sup> The focus on difficulties with students—which we acted out in improvised scenes—did serve an important function in allowing NTTF (particularly young women) to voice their frustrations with gendered classroom dynamics. However, thanks to valuable feedback from allied NTTF who attended one rehearsal, we omitted these scenes from the final production and replaced them with facts/figures about the high percentage of women in contingent teaching positions.

<sup>12</sup> While we hoped that this performance of complicity would motivate play participants and audience members to action, the audience's reaction would remain impossible to foretell. As with the Auraria custodian performance, where audience members were compelled to bear witness, to see scenes that complicate the institutional narrative and reclaim the story in the “theater of real life,” we hoped that they could offer existing yet unknown organizing efforts (Martin 27).

WORKS CITED

- Brecht, Bertolt. "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting." *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, Ed. and trans. John Willett. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957. Print.
- Cloud, Dana L. *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics: Rhetorics of Therapy*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. 1998. Print.
- Cohen-Cruz, Jan. "Redefining the Private: From Personal Storytelling to Political Act." *A Boal Companion: Dialogues on Theatre and Cultural Politics*. Eds. Jan Cohen-Cruz and Mady Schutzman. New York: Routledge, 2006. 103-13. Print.
- Cohen-Cruz, Jan and Mady Schutzman, eds. *A Boal Companion: Dialogues on Theatre and Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Craft, James A., and Marian M. Exteit. "New Strategies in Union Organizing." *Journal of Labor Research* 4.1 (1983): 19-32. Print.
- Gillam, Alice M. "Feminism and Composition Research: Researching as a Woman." *Composition Studies/Freshman English News* 20.1 (1992): 47-54. Print.
- Kezar, Adrianna J. *Embracing Non-tenure Track Faculty: Changing Campuses for the New Faculty Majority*. New York: Routledge, 2012. Print.
- Linds, Warren. "Metaxis: Dancing (in) the In-Between." *A Boal Companion: Dialogues on Theatre and Cultural Politics*. Eds. Jan Cohen-Cruz and Mady Schutzman. New York: Routledge, 2006. 114-24. Print.
- Maisto, Maria. "New Directions in Adjunct Advocacy and the Relevance of Arts Activism." Message to Sue Doe. 24 Aug. 2014. E-Mail.
- Martin, Randy. "Staging the Political: Boal and the Horizons of Theatrical Commitment." *A Boal Companion: Dialogues on Theatre and Cultural Politics*. Eds. Jan Cohen-Cruz and Mady Schutzman. New York: Routledge, 2006. 23-32. Print.
- Picher, Marie-Claire. "Democratic Process and the Theater of the Oppressed." *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 116 (2007): 79-88. Print.
- Pickett, Brian. "Denver Custodians Rehearse Resistance Onstage." *Labor Notes*, n.p. 13 Dec. 2012. Web. 1 Jan. 2014.
- Popen, Shari. "Aesthetic Spaces/Imaginative Geographies." *A Boal Companion: Dialogues on Theatre and Cultural Politics*. Eds. Jan Cohen-Cruz and Mady Schutzman. New York: Routledge, 2006. 125-32. Print.
- Schaedler, Maria Tereza. "Boal's Theater of the Oppressed and How to Derail Real-Life Tragedies with Imagination." *New Directions for Youth Development* 2010.125 (2010): 141-51. Print.
- Schell, Eileen. *Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers: Gender, Contingent Labor, and Writing Instruction*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1998. Print.
- Schmidt, Peter. "'Metro' Unionizing Strategy Is Viewed as a Means to Empower Adjunct Faculty." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 3 Dec. 2012. Web. 26 Aug. 2014.
- The Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success*. Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California, 2014. Web. 26 Aug. 2014.
- Walsh, Jim. "Who We Are." *Romero Theater Troupe*, 2010. Web. 1 Jan. 2014.

# Toward an Economy of Activist Literacies in Composition Studies: Possibilities for Political Disruption

Caroline Dadas   Montclair State University  
Justin Jory   Salt Lake Community College

## KEYWORDS

activist literacies, circulation, multimodality, remediation, student protestors

**O**n Thursday, November 18, 2011, social networking sites transformed into communities of incensed students, academics, and citizens. Users on the sites circulated a series of texts composed by UC Davis students and faculty that suggested a group of peaceful student protestors (who were calling attention to significant tuition hikes in recent years) had become the victims of police brutality. Among these texts were student-captured videos that showed Lieutenant John Pike and other officers of the Davis police force hosing the bodies of seated protesters with military-grade pepper spray. Viewers watching these videos could witness non-violent students coughing uncontrollably from the intake of chemicals while they writhed in pain and huddled together on the ground as officers continued their assault. The videos circulated in juxtaposition to official statements issued by Chancellor Linda Katehi and other campus officials, which contended police acted out of necessity and in the best interest of the campus community.

The network of circulating texts grew to include a number of open letters and public statements from Davis administrators and faculty; more student-captured videos that offered varying perspectives on the pepper spray incident; live broadcasts of the campus community gathering for campus rallies and protesting outside campus buildings as UC board members met to determine best courses of action; and even a series of photoshopped images known as the “Casually Pepper Spray Everything Cop” meme, which showed John Pike casually discharging a stream of pepper spray on everything from the Constitution of the United States to Gandhi. In a matter of days, Chancellor Linda Katehi shifted from a reprimanding discourse that placed blame on students and contended police action was necessary to one that was apologetic and argued that officers acted against her command. By week’s end, she established a task force to investigate what had become a highly visible and contentious public incident, and she faced widespread pressure to resign from a petition with over 150,000 signatures from citizens across the nation.

Phenomena like the Davis incident represent rich sites for examining activist literacies in the 21st century. In this article, we examine the Davis incident to show that citizens can influence how semiotic resources interact over time and across physical and digital spaces to enact political disruption. When officers used military-grade pepper spray to disperse students from the Davis

campus, students, faculty, and citizens at large engaged in a series of literate practices to shape public perception of the incident. Importantly, their practices deployed semiotic resources—such as actions, technologies, modalities, genres, and discourses—that competed with those enacted by Davis administrators. We maintain that understanding how to coordinate the interaction of semiotic resources illuminates an economy of literate practice, representing a key component of a new activism.

Incidents like Davis—as well as those that played out in other contexts such as Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring—indicate that political disruption is carried out and sustained through complex systems of situated literate activity that occur over time and across myriad locations. As participants in these systems of literate activity, activists are compelled to navigate and manage a network of semiotic resources in which the potential of any given resource—its political value—is relative to its position in the network and not always readily apparent. In this way, such phenomena raise interesting questions about the available means of disruption and, more specifically, how individuals determine the affordances and limitations of the semiotic resources that enable disruption and challenge the status quo.

## TOWARD AN ECONOMY OF ACTIVIST LITERACIES IN COMPOSITION

In recent years, scholars have undertaken a number of disciplinary projects in their pursuit to understand activist literacies in the 21st century. Such projects situate technologies at the center of politically-oriented literate practice (Selber; Selfe, *Technology*), argue that knowledge of multimodal communication is essential to activist efforts (The New London Group; Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel), contend that genres are sites of political struggles and resources for subverting political structures (Miller; Pare), and claim that discourses can inscribe and challenge political relations (Fairclough; Gee). Furthermore, they draw attention to the contexts in which texts and information are produced and circulated (Porter; Trimbur), suggesting that production, distribution, and exchange are key components of political disruption. We locate this project at the intersection of these scholastic areas, addressing a need for research into the literate, semiotic practices of activist publics. While scholars (Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel) have begun to detail this kind of activist work, we seek to contribute an in-depth analysis of one of the more noteworthy instances of semiotic remediation as literate practice: the reaction to the UC Davis pepper spray incident.

Through our analysis, we describe an array of practices and semiotic resources that comprise what we term an *economy of activist literacies*. An *economy* assigns value to particular literate practices within a situated context. As James Porter has explained, “There must be some value for the reader or for the writer in the act of producing, distributing, exchanging texts . . . Writing—all writing, I would say—resides in economic systems of value, exchange, and capital (176). The value of these economies, rather than stemming from a monetary source, derive from “desire, sharing, participation, [and] emotional connectedness” (Porter 176). To generate material of value in these economies, composers must be adept at what Johndan Johnson-Eilola has called “symbolic-analytic

work”: the ability to rearrange, combine, and filter existing information rather than create original texts (28, 134). Collaborative by nature, symbolic-analytic work demands an ability to draw on material created by others and remix it for specific rhetorical exigencies. In doing so, composers not only enable more effective communication in this new information economy but also can assume political power by realigning the relations among available social identities (Lemke 295). Symbolic-analytic work, then, provides access to a new kind of political participation that often bears little resemblance to historically recognizable political action such as rallies or letter writing campaigns. The value in this new activism may rest in its ability to quickly build political coalitions that reach across geographic boundaries and media platforms: a pattern we saw reinforced in the response to the UC Davis pepper spraying incident.

In discussing UC Davis students’ (and others’) use of semiotic resources, we draw on the work of Paul Prior and Julie Hengst, who have positioned semiotic remediation as a way of thinking through the complex layers of activity that comprise modern communication. They contend that “[s]emiotic remediation as practice then is fundamental to understanding the work of culture as well as communication; it calls on us to attend to the diverse ways that semiotic performances are re-represented and reused across modes, media, and chains of activity” (2). Their emphasis on the reuse and re-representation of semiotic performances proves useful in describing the “chains of activity” that comprised the pepper spray incident and its ensuing fallout. In particular, the notion that communication takes places via multiple genres, modes, and mediated locations enables a richer understanding of how critics voiced their disapproval of the incident itself, as well as Chancellor Katehi’s response. We also appreciate Prior and Hengst’s effort to distinguish between a focus on semiotics and a focus on multimodality, the latter a term that has found currency in rhetoric and composition for the past decade (Kress and van Leeuwen; Selfe, *Multimodal*; Bowen and Whithaus). As Prior and Hengst argue, “Multimodality has primarily been taken up as an issue of the composition of artifacts rather than engagement in processes, of representational forms rather than situated sociocultural practices” (7). Because we are interested in the processes and practices that students and other activists employed in achieving a broad circulation of their critiques, we rely on scholarship that has theorized semiotic (re)production as a complex process of literate activity.

The various responses to the UC Davis pepper spray incident shed light on the tendency for semiotic performances to compete with each other for public validation. We say “compete” to emphasize the notion that, when it came to the public’s perception of what occurred, those who critiqued the police officers’ actions were working against already established discourses of alleged student misbehavior. Because Chancellor Katehi’s initial response suggested that students deserved the blame for the incidents of that day, subsequent semiotic reproductions challenged that interpretation of events. Savvy rhetoricians often rely on techniques for distribution—particularly within social media environments—to gain a wide circulation for their message(s) (Porter, *Recovering*), thereby challenging previous discursive accounts. In response to this case, many students turned to a variety of semiotic resources (involving photo editing software, video capturing media, and YouTube) as a means of critique, knowing that these compositions could be widely circulated in a short amount of time. John Trimbur has argued that rather than viewing a text’s moment of production as the

key moment in a rhetorical exchange, compositionists should more carefully consider the political implications of how a text circulates: “[Delivery] must be seen also as ethical and political—a democratic aspiration to devise delivery systems that circulate ideas, information, opinions, and knowledge and thereby expand the public forums in which people can deliberate on the issues of the day” (190). It is through circulation that texts reach their audiences and that semiotic reproduction is marshaled in the service of a particular perspective. Those who thought the police’s actions inappropriate found broad support by circulating their critiques widely, using the affordances of social media. This activism generated an economy of literate practice that found value in widespread support for the pepper-sprayed UC Davis students.

## CAMPUS-WIDE REACTION AT UC DAVIS

With our analysis of the responses to the pepper spray incident, we seek to make both a theoretical and a methodological argument. While we show how semiotic remediation serves as a useful frame for understanding how all the responses to the incident are part of a network of discourses and resources that represent the incident, we also argue that semiotic remediation teaches us *how* to navigate an economy of literate practice. By tracing the remediation of signs—in our case, by following the resources students and faculty used to rupture social identities established in the narrative set forth by administrative officials—we can gain an understanding of why certain discourses gain value over others. In this case, we argue that those discourses that critiqued the police’s action effectively competed against more “official” narratives that justified the police’s decision to utilize pepper spray. For example, immediately after officers dispersed students, Twitter users began distributing student-captured videos of the Davis pepper spray incident alongside several messages composed by Chancellor Linda Katehi. As a set of texts that circulated alongside one another, the messages and videos show how textual artifacts can compete for authority through the discourses, modalities, and media they deploy.

In the hours leading up to the pepper spray incident and immediately after, Chancellor Katehi composed and distributed a series of open messages to members of the UC Davis community. These messages worked with public statements issued by the Davis Police Chief and a campus spokesperson to represent the “official” voice on the incident. In her [first message addressed to “Davis Students,”](#) (Katehi, “Chancellor’s Message”) distributed hours before the pepper spray incident on November 18, she acknowledges the precept that institutions of higher education are sites for civil disobedience, and states that she “deeply appreciates and defends robust and respectful dialogue as a fundamental tenet of our great academic institution.” On November 23, faced with the challenge of responding to and justifying the use of police force, she distributed [her second message](#) only minutes after officers pepper-sprayed students (Katehi, “Chancellor’s Message”). In it, Katehi shifts blame and responsibility toward students and away from officials. She leans on her previous message as an official “warning” and suggests that students’ obstinate violation of the warning was a decision that subjected the greater campus community to unsafe conditions and worked against officials. Taking this violation seriously, she suggests it was her responsibility to the community to rectify the situation

and ensure students' safety.

Importantly, Katehi's messages represent student protestors and campus officers in a way that seeks to justify the Davis administration's use of pepper spray and constructs an ethos of responsibility for campus administrators. For instance, when Katehi claims in her messages that officials are steadfastly dedicated to upholding liberal values, such as students' rights to dialogue and peaceful assembly, she positions officials as student advocates and presents an ethos for officials that aligns with social expectations and values. After the incident occurs and officials must justify their actions to the greater community, she employs a discourse of agitation meant to authorize the use of police force and military-grade pepper spray. By invoking the image of outside agitators (obstinate students who worked against campus officials and aggressive protesters who entrapped officers leaving them no option but to use force), the protests are represented as a threat to the safety and well being of students and the greater campus community.

Videos of the day's events (see Figure 1) taken by students, challenge the "official" narrative by materializing, and thus re-presenting, the bodies that are abstracted in Katehi's messages: those of students and officers. In contrast to the hostile and dangerous environment depicted in these messages, which led officers to protect themselves and the student body, the videos show students and officers co-occupying the quad in charged but seemingly innocuous ways. Officers move freely around the quad without perturbation from what was presented in official statements as a hostile group of students who encircled officers. In particularly incriminating fashion, one video opens with Lieutenant John Pike freely approaching one of the seated protesters from behind. He gently pats the back of the seated student as the student leans back, looks him in the eyes and asks, "Just making sure: You're shooting us for sitting here?" Even as students plead with officers, chanting "You don't have to do this" and "Don't shoot students," the officers use pepper spray to inflict students' bodies with pain.



Fig. 1. A collection of videos, distributed immediately following the incident, that circulated widely .

These depictions of the pepper spraying stand as attempts to represent the "real" events of that day, in competition with administrative accounts of unruly students who needed to be disciplined. When it comes to thinking through competing accounts of a single event, Ralph Cintron's concepts of *partiality* and *presence*—two "polarizing forces" in language—remain helpful. Partiality, according to Cintron, is the notion that language projects imperfect representations of people and their activity that are biased, inexact, and ideologically saturated (8). Presence complements partiality by masking

the biases and inexactness of a given generic artifact, causing audiences to overlook the partiality of the artifact while taking it as real, true, or commonsensical. Both concepts inform how we might look at the competitive relationship between the student videos and the administrative messages. Katehi's language conjures images of a problematic material and social site—a dangerous campus environment—in which student bodies are at risk. To project this representation as “real” and conceal its partiality, the student bodies that were disciplined by Davis officers must be abstracted, kept out of immediate sight and on the peripheries, while language like “robust dialogue,” “peaceful assembly,” and “outside agitators” are invoked to constitute credible official identities and legitimize the use of police force and pepper spray. According to these tactics, the narrative is only “real” and can only transform into a widely accepted account that is largely unsusceptible to critique based on how and what it makes visible as well as what it conceals. After all, officials are acting in accordance with social expectations and thus become authorized and legitimized *only if* student bodies are in fact at risk.

However, when juxtaposed with administrative messages, the videos materialize the bodies of students and officers, effectively enacting symbolic-analytic work to suggest the official narrative is constructed and, indeed, partial. As Michael Sheridan, Jim Ridolfo, and Anthony Michel argue, photographic and filmic technologies often conceal their own partiality and carry with them an ethos of objectivity and authority. Thus, viewers of student videos experience a “real,” first-hand account of the incident in which they see that it is officials and not outside agitators who seem to threaten students. In this way, the videos persuasively rupture the social identities created in official messages and “crack” the facade of reality created by these messages. Importantly, the videos reveal the inexactness of official messages by highlighting the messages' partiality; it is in this work that the videos beckon a political coalition and create the possibility for disruption through semiotic remediation. This instance of activism suggests that capital in economies of literate activity resides not in any one text or in any one act of textual production, but in complex literate activity that assembles semiotic resources for specific rhetorical aims over time. In this way, capital is highly situated as it emerges from the way composers assemble and network semiotic resources.

## SEMIOTIC REMEDIATION BEYOND THE UC DAVIS CAMPUS

This set of reactions to the events of November 18, 2011—Chancellor Katehi's two messages, along with student videos and webcasts—formed the basis for the widespread semiotic remediation that occurred as news of the pepper spraying spread rapidly online. In particular, we cite two memes—“Casually Pepper Spray Everything Cop” and “Megyn Kelly Reaction”—as examples that gained a great deal of currency thanks to a broad circulation in the days following the event. Both memes coincided with the Occupy Wall Street protests<sup>1</sup> and appeared to draw on an ethic of civil disobedience as a guiding principle in what text or images were included. We offer these memes as evidence of how their designers validated UC Davis students' critiques of the police's actions, deeming those critiques more valid than Chancellor Katehi's justifications. Considering their rapid distribution through online channels, both memes also reinforce the importance of speed and

breadth of circulation in establishing an economy of literate activity.

The “Casually Pepper Spray Everything Cop” meme entries remixed a photo of Lieutenant John Pike pepper spraying UC Davis students, taken by Louise Macabitas and posted to Reddit on November 19, 2011 (Scott). The original photo shows students being sprayed while seated on the ground, their hands and arms attempting to cover their faces (see Figure 2).



Fig. 2. The original photo that led to the “Casually Pepper Spray Everything” meme. Image taken from <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/casually-pepper-spray-everything-cop>.

The moment at which Pike’s gait is captured by the camera makes him appear at ease—an impression that led to the meme’s incorporation of “casually” into its title. On November 20, two remixes of the photo began circulating online (see Figure 3): one of Pike in the 1819 piece *Declaration of Independence* and the other in the iconic 1884 painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La*



Fig. 3. Two remixes of the original photo capturing John Pike pepper spraying students. Images taken from <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/casually-pepper-spray-everything-cop>.

*Grande Jatte* (Scott). These two initial iterations of the meme use semiotic remediation (1) to further the argument of the initial student videos/broadcasts that cast both Katehi's decision and Pike's subsequent actions as a violation of the students' right to engage in civil disobedience and (2) to draw on the discourses associated with these two paintings to further the point that the pepper spraying was unjust.

The first example, which shows Pike spraying the Declaration of Independence, represents a fairly straightforward argument that Pike's actions comprised a violation of students' constitutional rights to engage in peaceful protest. In the second example, Pike is seen traversing the idyllic scene of the Island of Grande Jatte with his pepper spray, presumably disrupting the leisurely scene. In comparing the park-goers in the painting to the UC Davis students, the designer argues that they had every right to be doing what they were doing.

On the heels of these initial two meme iterations, dozens of variations of the meme began circulating online. New versions of the meme included images of famous pieces of art, depictions of historical moments, and important cultural touchstones. Each iteration, in conjunction with its particular approach, emphasized the intrusiveness of Pike's actions (see Figure 4).



Fig. 4. Subsequent versions of the remixed photo. Images taken from <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/casually-pepper-spray-everything-cop>.

As a result of the meme's rapid popularity, the mainstream media began broadcasting reports not

only of the incident itself but also of the memes' critical response to it. According to KnowYourMeme.com, on November 21, "additional compilations were posted on Washington Post, ABC News, the Metro, Gawker, and BuzzFeed. Four separate single topic Tumblrs were also created that day...Over the next month, Pepper Spray Cop images were shared and discussed on CBS News, CNet, The Week and Scientific American" (Scott). In the majority of cases, the news items focused primarily on criticism of Pike's (and by extension, the university's) actions, with only a passing mention (if at all) of Katehi's rationale. The initial media response to the pepper spraying gave a fairly biased perspective on the incident, neither critiquing nor supporting Katehi; once the meme came into existence, however, it generated enough activity online to justify being a news item in itself. In this sense, the meme creators' use of semiotic remediation resulted in an economy of critique that gained significant value within only days of the incident.

Not all mainstream media focused on the critique of Katehi's actions, however. On November 21, 2011, Fox News reporter Megyn Kelly discussed the UC Davis incident on *The O'Reilly Factor*, offering support for the officers' actions. At one point during her appearance, she downplayed the noxious effects of the pepper spray by characterizing the substance as a food product: "Bill O'Reilly: 'First of all, pepper spray—that just burns your eyes, right?' Megyn Kelly: 'It's like a derivative of actual pepper. It's a food product, essentially'" ([www.knowyourmeme.com](http://www.knowyourmeme.com)). The following day, a meme appeared on Reddit consisting of a stock photo of Kelly and her use of the word "essentially" to downplay various horrific experiences (see Figure 5). Through this meme, writers/designers sought to remediate Fox's media coverage, which they deemed unfair in its portrayal of the pepper spray incident. While this meme veered far enough away from the actual pepper spraying that some audiences might not have realized that the two memes were related, it nonetheless effectively called into question the ethos of Fox News. Both memes, then, evidence the ability of semiotic remediation to challenge mainstream media reports and to establish an economy of literate practice through activist means.



Fig. 5. The "Megyn Kelly Essentially" meme. Images taken from <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/megyn-kelly-essentially>.

## IMPLICATIONS

Our examination of the Davis incident shows that chains of literate practice drive the semiotic remediation and systems of circulation that in turn enable disruption. For rhetoric and composition scholars interested in complex notions of political disruption, semiotic remediation suggests that disruption occurs through complex systems of literate activity in which semiotic resources interact

and compete. As Prior and Hengst argue, this means that “researchers should look at semiotic trajectories and chains across time and place, recognizing both the need to understand semiotics as dispersed and mediated and the value of tracing out mediation, ANT-like, rhizomatically across situated functional systems” (24). Such research requires scholars to trace the ways that semiotic resources circulate and interact over time, revealing key moments when semiotic resources enable political critique. In the case of the pepper spray incident, by tracing the ways that students’ and faculty’s activity circulated alongside and interacted with that of administrators, we can theorize how the semiotic resources these participants employed gained value only in relation to the other.

Relatedly, we believe that as teachers we need to discuss how semiotic remediation can enable political disruption. As in the past we may have focused on how writing as a semiotic system can effect change, we now have to account for other forms of literate activity that may disrupt the status quo. In particular, we need to discuss past instances of semiotic remediation—such as the myriad reactions to the pepper spray incident—in the classroom with students. Using the language of partiality and presence can help emphasize not only how meaning is always contingent and unstable (partiality), but also why actors can be motivated to make it seem otherwise (presence). In discussing the role that resources play in semiotic remediation, we need to resist the tendency to essentialize their respective affordances and constraints, which runs the risk of suggesting to students that meaning-making is a simplistic, formulaic, or at best stable process. Instead, we should design pedagogies that present affordances and constraints as messy and complex phenomena—shifting and unstable; based on particular social, cultural, historical, and material conditions; and, thus, as problems that are waiting to be theorized. In short, we should be doing this theorizing with our students, using recent examples.

The value of the responses critiquing the UC Davis pepper spray incident lies in their resistance to powerful discourses coming from the administration and other sources that supported the officers’ actions. Because of the videos and memes that objected to the administration’s rationale, different versions of the day’s events—versions that supported the students’ right to peacefully protest and not be pepper sprayed because of it—gained significant capital online and in mainstream media. In other words, the chain of literate activity in response to the pepper spraying incident should stand as reason for optimism that those in positions of lesser power hold the ability to challenge the powerful’s justification for their own ethically questionable acts. Despite its limited scope, scholarly work such as our examination of the Davis incident has direct implications for rhetoric and composition pedagogies that aim to prepare students for politically oriented civic participation. It is with greater awareness of how to navigate and manage semiotic resources within systems of circulation that student-activists can read and shape the political value of various resources to enact disruption. While the economy itself is one driven by semiotic remediation, successful participation in that economy depends on rhetorically savvy symbolic-analytic work—and this is at the heart of a new activism in composition studies.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The student protest itself was at least partially inspired by the “Occupy” movement that gained traction in the previous months.

WORKS CITED

- Bowen, Tracy, and Carl Whithaus, eds. *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2013. Print. Pitt Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture.
- Cintron, Ralph (2003). "'Gates Locked' and the Violence of Fixation." *Towards a Rhetoric of Everyday Life: New Directions in Research on Writing, Text, and Discourse*. Eds. P. Martin Nystrand and John Duffy. 5-23. Print. Rhetoric of the Human Sciences.
- Don. "Megyn Kelly Essentially." *Know Your Meme*. Cheezburger, Inc., 23 Nov. 2011. Web. 1 March 2014. Web.
- Fairclough, Norman. *Language and Power*. New York: Longman, 1989. Print.
- Gee, James Paul. *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*. New York: Routledge, 1999. Print.
- Hall, Jamie. "Police at UC Davis – Nov. 18, 2011." *YouTube*. YouTube, 18 Nov. 2011. Web. 21 April 2013.
- . "Police PEPPER SPRAY UC Davis STUDENT PROTESTERS!" *YouTube*. YouTube, 18 Nov. 2011. Web. 21 April 2013.
- Johnson-Eilola, Johndan. *Datacloud: Toward a New Theory of Online Work*. Creskill, N.J.: Hampton, 2005. Print.
- Katehi, Linda. "Chancellor's Message to Protestors on the Quad." *Chancellor Linda P.B. Katehi*. U of California at Davis, 18 Nov. 2011. Web. 21 April 2013.
- . "Chancellor Addresses Friday's Removal of Tents from the Quad." *Chancellor Linda P.B. Katehi*. The University of California at Davis, 23 Nov. 2011. Web. 21 April 2013.
- Kress, Gunther, and Theo van Leeuwen. *Multimodal Discourse*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001. Print. Hodder Arnold.
- Lemke, Jay. "Multimodal Genres and Transmedia Traversals: Social Semiotics and the Political Economy of the Sign." *Semiotica* 173.1 (2009): 283-97. Print.
- Meggeyhead. "UC Davis Occupy Protest November 18, 2011." *YouTube*. YouTube, 18 Nov. 2011. Web. 21 April 2013.
- Miller, Carolyn. "Genre as Social Action." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984): 151-67. Print.
- New London Group. "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures." *Harvard Educational Review* 66.1 (1996): 60-92. Print.
- Pare, Anthony. "Genre and Identity: Individuals, Institutions, and Ideology." *The Rhetoric and Ideology of Genre: Strategies for Stability and Change*. Eds. Richard Coe, Lorelei Lingard, and Tatiana Teslenko. Creskill: Hampton, 2002. 57-71. Print. Research in the Teaching of Rhetoric and Composition.
- Porter, James. "Rhetoric in (as) a Digital Economy." *Rhetorics and Technologies: New Directions in Writing and Communication*. Ed. Stuart Selber. Columbus: U of South Carolina, 2010. 173-97. Print. Studies in Rhetoric/Communication.
- . "Recovering Delivery for Digital Rhetoric." *Computers & Composition* 26. (2009): 207-24. Print.
- Prior, Paul, and Julie Hengst. "Introduction: Exploring Semiotic Remediation." *Exploring Semiotic Remediation as Discourse Practice*. Eds. Paul Prior and Julie Hengst. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 1-23. Print.
- Prior, Paul, Janine Solberg, Patrick Berry, Hannah Bellwoar, Bill Chewning, Karen J. Lunsford, Liz Rohan, Mary P. Sheridan-Rabideau, Jody Shipka, Derek Van Ittersum, and Joyce Walker. "Re-situating and Re-mediating the Canons: A Cultural-Historical Remapping of Rhetorical Activity." *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy* 11.3 (2007).

Web. 1 March 2014.

Scott, Maxwell Carl. "Casually Pepper Spray Everything Cop." *Know Your Meme*. Cheezburger, Inc., 2011. Web. 1 March 2014.

Selber, Stuart. *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004. Print. Studies in Writing and Rhetoric.

Selfe, Cynthia L. *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers*. New York: Hampton, 2007. Print. New Directions in Computers and Composition.

---. *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century: The Importance of Paying Attention*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1999. Print. Studies in Writing and Rhetoric.

Sheridan, Michael, Jim Ridolfo, and Anthony Michel. *The Available Means of Persuasion: Mapping a Theory and Pedagogy of Multimodal Public Rhetoric*. Anderson: Parlor, 2012. Print. New Media Theory.

Trimbur, John. "Composition and the Circulation of Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 52.2 (2000): 188-219. Print.

# Rhetorics of Hope: Complicating Western Narratives of a "Social Media Revolution"

Rachael Shapiro Syracuse University

## KEYWORDS

transnational feminism, Twitter, social media revolution, Iran, digital literacies, literacy myth

Given the fact that technology is at the core of the One-Third world's ability to dominate—economically, militarily, culturally—the two-thirds world, isn't it also problematic to assume that, with access to technology, liberation from oppressive representational practices is a given?

—Queen 485

In June of 2009, incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared the winner of the Iranian presidential election, while opposition leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi cited blatant violations of the fair electoral process. Rallying for democratic justice and calling for action, Iranians filled the streets in the largest demonstrations since the 1979 revolution. The authorities applied pressure against the protesters and people died. Mousavi and Green Movement supporters marched with tape over their mouths, symbolizing the government's silencing of their votes, their demonstrations, and the democratic process. Meanwhile, the Twittersphere was getting louder and louder.

Similar to WTO, G-8, and G-20 protests around the world in the last decade, Twitter and other mobile technology users were active in spreading information and ideas about the protests in Tehran. According to *Mashable*, use of the #IranElection hashtag reached a staggering 221,744 per hour at its height during the June protests (Parr). Western media outlets described Twitter and other social media platforms as helping protesters to orchestrate demonstration logistics and movement through the streets of Tehran. Accounts told that Iranians following and posting #IranElection updates used the almost immediate spread of information to quickly avoid police barriers and reorganize. Striving for political solidarity in the West, the clamoring use of the #CNNfail hashtag prompted expanded CNN coverage of the election protests (see Poniewozik), and the Obama administration pressured the Iranian government to maintain Twitter access during the struggles. When the Iranian government did shut down most Internet access, sympathizers like San Franciscan Austin Heap set up and broadcast instructions for accessing proxy servers set up around the world to circumvent Internet blocks. As Clay Shirky explained at the time, "These flat networks of groups, as opposed to one hierarchical structure, allow instant, on-the-ground, mass communication using mobile devices" (Rawlinson). It was an exciting time for Westerners who watched in anticipation, seeing in real time how Twitter was helping Iranians organize against what the Green Movement described as

a repressive regime, watching as social media was coming to the aid of democracy across the globe. And our very anticipation that (American-made) digital technologies and their literacies could serve these democratic ends assuredly shaped how we saw the situation unfold—at the expense of how it actually happened.

Using a transnational feminist analytic that traces ideological traffic, one aim of this article is to offer a more complex analysis of technology and social protest that counter-poses the U.S. agenda embedded in the digital literacy myth, which I define below. Western rhetorics of hope for digital technologies and their literacies circulate globally and shape public understanding of digitally mediated events. I analyze how such hope circulates in U.S. public intellectual debates and the news media's coverage of social media's role in the 2009 Iranian election protests. These narratives, I find, traffic the digital literacy myth in order to preserve Western expectations of digital technologies and their literacies as serving the democratic project. I argue that these rhetorics of hope render invisible to the Western world a more complex perception of technology's *actual* use for global social protest movements, particularly erasing Iranian women's significant use of technology and embodiment to serve their political project. Following Saskia Sassen, I aim to tell the story of the 2009 Iranian election protests in ways that look beyond the technical capacities of digital tools, understanding their power in the context of "the social environments in which they get used" (342). Through this reading, I contextualize and complicate Western rhetorics of hope and highlight how Iranian women used and were used by technology during the protests.

## NARRATIVES OF HOPE: TRACING THE DIGITAL LITERACY MYTH IN WESTERN MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE 2009 IRANIAN ELECTION PROTESTS

The digital literacy myth—in which government, public, and academic discourses cast digital technologies and their literacies as a means of access to economic gain in the global economy and the spread of democracy on a global scale—is deeply ingrained in our national imaginary and comes with social, political, and material consequences. Long ago, Harvey Graff, Brian Street and other literacy scholars revealed the falsity of literacy's guarantee for a democratic citizenry and upward mobility for individuals, describing it as "the literacy myth." While many scholars came to critique these deeply held hopes for literacy, the development of computer technologies and their associated literacies has recaptured the essence of the literacy myth. As Selfe pointed out in *Literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, the democratic and economic promises of the literacy myth were blended with the economic agenda of the Clinton Administration in the 1990s, and trafficked through policy such as the 1996 National Education Technology Plan, *Getting America's Students Ready for the 21st Century: Meeting the Technology Literacy Challenge*.

Since then, the hope that technologies and their literacies will bring such economic and democratic progress has continued to expand alongside processes of globalization and the development of social media. In what I describe as the digital literacy myth, the economic promises (or consequences) of the original literacy myth are no longer simply afforded to the individual within the national

economy, but to the nation within the global market. Literacy's promise to strengthen the democratic public in the U.S. is now extended to promote the spread of "democracy" across national borders. Digital literacies and education, the U.S. economic agenda within the global marketplace, domestic social policy, and U.S. foreign policy have all born the ideological traffic of the original literacy myth as it has evolved to address the anxieties of our current context. The digital literacy myth and its attendant economic and political agenda now circulate as ideological traffic in Western narratives like those describing the 2009 Iranian election protests, as I trace below.

While later heavily critiqued, many early Western media accounts of the Iranian election protests focused on the use of social media and other modes of digital literacies, such as email and texting, for both coordination of on-the-ground organizing and for dissemination of counter-narratives of the political clashes. The hype was compelling for an audience who is intrigued by, and who stands to benefit from, narratives of digital platforms and their literacies as integral to spreading global democracy. Here is an instance wherein a corrupt government sought to smash the capillaries of information transmission both within and outside of the confines of the state, while the people, guided by their just and righteous will to true freedom, exercised their right to free communication through the cunning use of technologies—or so some told the story. Contrastingly, Evgeny Morozov argues in *The Net Delusion* that Western media response to the Iranian election protests showcased our cyber-utopianism, and he urges that in order to ward off the tangible political dangers of our cyber-utopianism and Internet-centrism, we must replace them with cyber-realism and cyber-agnosticism. Driven by what Morozov calls the Google Doctrine, or "the fervent conviction that given enough gadgets, connectivity, and foreign funding, dictatorships are doomed" (5), these Western narratives express our greatest hopes for the political potential of the technologies we love.

In this section, I aim to heed Morozov's call for a more tempered understanding of technology's democratic potential by listening carefully to what motivates our cyber-utopianism in the wake of the 2009 protests. Following a transnational feminist analytic, I consider the long-standing and currently evolving U.S. agenda in preserving the myth of guaranteed economic progress and democratic promise of technologies and their literacies. Within her framework for networking arguments, Rebecca Dingo uses transnational feminist M. Jacqui Alexander's concept of ideological trafficking in order to reveal "how arguments are networked within a single occasion to show that ideologies traffic across time and texts" (70). For Dingo, tracing ideological traffic unearths the ideological baggage that shapes powerful ideas, allowing rhetoricians to "[lay] bare the rhetorics that have become naturalized and a common part of our political imaginary" (69-70). In the case of Western narratives of the 2009 Iranian election protests, many accounts presented "flattened" narratives that attributed political agency to the technology rather than to the people, thereby missing the opportunity to focus on the more significant nuances of the social movement.<sup>1</sup> Rather than recognizing how women engaged in embodied revolutionary activism, Westerners described a "Twitter Revolution," thereby trafficking the digital literacy myth and erasing the bodies of those fighting for political reform.

My analysis makes visible how Western narratives of the Iranian election protests *traffic* the ideological baggage of the digital literacy myth. This rhetorical networking makes visible Western conceptions of technology as inherently democratic, thereby serving U.S. interests at least as far as

to preserve the myth, while (perhaps) inadvertently working to obscure and flatten the specific local history that shaped the protests and the movement of Iranians therein. Most intriguing about the rhetoric of the U.S. media sampled below is how frequently it attributes political agency to technology rather than to the protesters themselves. While the complexity varies in terms of coverage of the political, material, and historical realities of that particular Iranian moment, each of the following examples from news stories or op-eds published by major Western media outlets takes the step of assigning democratic progress to the technology, rather than to the Iranians who used it.

## LOCATING AGENCY IN RHETORICS OF A "SOCIAL MEDIA REVOLUTION"

An unnamed author for *Fox News* writes in "Twitter Links Iran Protesters to Outside World" that the Iranian government made efforts to block Facebook, YouTube, and BBC Persian, but that they failed to block Twitter. S/he explains that due to this failure, "the simple microblogging service has become Iran's lifeline to the outside, a way for Iranians to tell the world what's happening on the streets of Tehran in real time — and a vital means of communication among themselves" ("Twitter Links"). In this account, Twitter's link to networks beyond national borders is a matter of survival for Iranians. Like other examples, the author cites Twitter's choice to delay server maintenance in Iran as a generous service to Iranian protesters. This article attributes powerful agency to Twitter through a description of its technical and social capacities—its affordances such as sharing images and videos, the use of the popular hashtag #IranElection, and the use of proxy servers—thereby trafficking the digital literacy myth and its insistence on the democratic power of digital technologies and their literacies. Other examples from Western media coverage of the protests, however, go much further.

In Mark Ambinder's *Atlantic* article, "The Revolution Will Be Twittered," he remarks, "when histories of the Iranian election are written, Twitter will doubtless be cast as a protagonal technology that enabled the powerless to survive a brutal crackdown and information blackout by the ruling authorities." While there may have been some Western coverage of the protests against Ahmadinejad without the service, Ambinder explains, Twitter served the protesters by spreading information about on-the-ground circumstances in real time; "In this way, Twitter served as an intelligence service for the Iranian opposition." Secondly, he argues, the tweets got the West involved, including the #CNNfail movement critiquing CNN's lack of coverage of the protests. He writes that technology does not determine an election's outcome, but he speculates that Mousavi had most likely not been persecuted, assassinated, or arrested because of the threat that social media could facilitate backlash. The Ahmadinejad regime, he argues, is disempowered by the Iranian people's access to "ways of communicating and organizing outside of their control. Mousavi would become an instant martyr. Twitter, Facebook, blogs—and the mainstream—are all colluding to keep hope alive for the Iranian people." More overtly than in the case of the *Fox News* article, Ambinder's rhetoric assigns agency and *intent* to social media. The final line quoted above, for instance, features Twitter, Facebook, and blogs as the subjects of the sentence, and "colluding" as their verb. To "collude" implies that the media are working together with a particular goal—the goal to "keep hope alive for the Iranian people."

This phrasing suggests that without the affordances of the social media platform, the light of hope for political democracy and social freedom would surely be extinguished. In this case, not only does the digital literacy myth become trafficked into the author's take on the protests, but the democratic power and agency infused within the technology is cast as greater than that of the people themselves.

In their *The New York Times* piece, "Social Networks Spread Defiance Online," Brad Stone and Noam Cohen open by describing Twitter and other social media as an antidote to state media repression, telling of the use of Twitter to spread news and images from the protests. While they refer to the notion of a Twitter Revolution as a cliché, they write that "Twitter is aware of the power of its service," noting the company's choice to delay maintenance on the servers that could have interrupted Iranians' use of the media. Stone and Cohen tell of efforts to bypass government censorship and blocked access through use of proxy servers, such as those set up by Austin Heap of San Francisco, who claimed that about 750 Iranians were using his service at any given moment. Stone and Cohen quote Heap's sentiment that "cyber activism can be a way to empower people living under less than democratic governments around the world."

Stone and Cohen's article is more complex than the others in its analysis. With this extended coverage, however, come more intense attributions of political will and agency to the media itself, as well as to the corporate decisions of the (now publicly traded) company. Sampled above, we see constructions like "Twitter is aware of the power of its service." The authors take their interpretations of Twitter's function in the Iranian election protests and restate them as the media's self-conscious and politically informed interventions into Iranian politics. Such analysis reflects the critiques made by Saskia Sassen that Internet scholars and commentators tend to describe digital platforms "in terms of what they can do and assume that they will do," then apply those hypothetical affordances to their readings of social events (342). The desire to read those affordances as democratically progressive, and to read technology's role in social events as actualizing that potential, reflects the ideological traffic and persuasive currency of the digital literacy myth.

In a final example from *Time Magazine*, Lev Grossman reflects on Twitter's presence in the protests and its power as an accessible, mobile and immediate service. Describing the technical, and thus political, affordances, Grossman argues that "this makes Twitter practically ideal for a mass protest movement, both very easy for the average citizen to use and very hard for any central authority to control." Grossman does attend to some of the complications about Twitter's role in the protests—reflecting that "Twitter isn't a magic bullet against dictators." He concludes that while it didn't cause the protests, Twitter did permit dialogue in the face of dictatorship:

Twitter didn't start the protests in Iran, nor did it make them possible. But there's no question that it has emboldened the protesters, reinforced their conviction that they are not alone and engaged populations outside Iran in an emotional, immediate way that was never possible before. [...] Totalitarian governments rule by brute force, and because they control the consensus worldview of those they rule. Tyranny, in other words, is a monologue. But as long as Twitter is up and running, there's no such thing.

The above passage contains perhaps the most direct instances of Western media's trend in constructing Twitter as the most powerful political agent in the Iranian election protests, positioning the social

media platform as the actor upon Iranians via the constructions that Twitter has “emboldened,” “reinforced,” and “engaged.” Its availability and technical affordances are described in their capacity to thwart totalitarian government tyranny.

Grossman’s statement that “Twitter isn’t a magic bullet against dictators” may be an ironic acknowledgment of his overzealousness in describing Twitter’s role in the protests, but his zeal persists nevertheless. In fact, most of the articles recognized, to some extent, that Twitter was not the cause of the movement, nor was it capable of winning the battle in place of actual protesters—but the moments where the authors point to this fact seem like a brief pause in between descriptions that paint the platform as the champion of Iranian democracy. It seems that, though they knew they shouldn’t, Western-positioned authors wanted to ascribe political agency and democratic good will to social media platforms like Twitter, working its magic on behalf of the Iranian protesters. That such authors articulated the political agency of the digital platform over that of the people in Iran—that the idea of technology serving democracy across the globe was trafficked into the very grammatical constructions of these commentators even if they acknowledged at the same time that such claims were reductive—merely speaks to the pressing power of the digital literacy myth as it hails us. In these Western narratives of a “Social Media Revolution,” Twitter is caricatured as a revolutionary political actor possessing agency that it can and did *give* to protesters in and outside of Iran in order to challenge authoritarian corruption and preserve the interests of democracy.

## COMPETING HOPES: DEBATING SOCIAL MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY IN THE WEST

Despite the trends in locating agency in the technology—rather than the people—that I’ve illustrated above, there was certainly not a homogenous understanding of social media’s role among Western reactions. There has been, in fact, some debate in the weeks and years following the protests, especially as events like the Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movements brought new relevance to the question. In an exchange in *Foreign Affairs*, for instance, public intellectual heavyweights (and perhaps significantly, two white males) Malcolm Gladwell and Clay Shirky debate the extent to which social media has been crucial to recent social movements. The debate evolves out of the juxtaposition of Gladwell’s 2010 essay, “Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted,” and Shirky’s 2011 piece, “The Political Power of Social Media.” Shirky and Gladwell remain committed to particular iterations of the project of democracy, but their disagreement over the role of and potential for social media in protest movements suggests that there are moments of rift, or cracks, in the digital literacy myth wherein conflicting versions of democracy and ideas about technology compete.

In Gladwell’s article, he argues fervently that “we seem to have forgotten what activism is” (43), and that “social media can’t provide what social change has always required” (42). Gladwell is rightly concerned about over-attribution of activist agency to technology; he angrily recaps moments of overzealous response to the use of Twitter in Iran, and in Moldova before that. Citing Mark Pfeifle’s wish to nominate the social media platform for a Nobel Peace Prize, Gladwell returns to Civil Rights

era activism as the defining example of what *real* activism is: an activity that requires high personal risk on the part of protesters and a network of strong ties to incite participation. Social media, Gladwell argues, “makes it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact. The instruments of social media are well suited to making the existing social order more efficient. They are not a natural enemy of the status quo” (49). He argues that rights of consequence in the face of brutal and material oppression will not be won by and for the disenfranchised through slactivist means.

The following year, Clay Shirky’s article in *Foreign Affairs* questions U.S. government strategy and foreign policy in the Information Age. Shirky advocates for an “environmental approach,” in which U.S. policy would support saturation of social media to build a strong public sphere (5). He argues that an informed and literate citizenry who is connected enough for exchange of ideas is necessary for political freedom (6), and that this environment is best evolved slowly over time. Invoking some of the central tenets of the digital literacy myth, Shirky suggests that in order to appeal to nations with inclinations toward censorship and repression of its citizenry, the U.S. government ought to highlight the possibility for financial growth. Since governments understand that their economies suffer when they restrict access to digital markets, “the U.S. government should work for conditions that increase the conservative dilemma, appealing to states’ self-interest rather than the contentious virtue of freedom, as a way to create or strengthen countries’ public spheres” (9). For Shirky, the digital facilitates the literate citizenry on its way to achieving and preserving democratic freedom by virtue of its ability to connect the people.

This position lays bare some of the economic interests that assure the digital literacy myth’s viability. According to Shirky, the U.S. should encourage other nations to sustain digital networks for their own economic gain—a strategy that he suggests will have the added benefit of nurturing a more democratic public sphere. What Shirky does not explicitly acknowledge here is how the U.S.’s own economic interests are served by widening the global technology consumer base, and therefore his suggestion also serves the economic agenda that circulates with the digital literacy myth. In other words, the social and economic national agenda tied to democratic narratives about digital technologies and their literacies can be articulated as: literacy + digital connection + economic incentives for so-called authoritarian nations = exported democracy + economic benefits for those states (+ U.S. economic gains from the spread of global investment in technology).<sup>2</sup>

Shirky does acknowledge that just as protesters can use technologies to strengthen their political offenses, so can the state (though, as he alluded to above, states profit economically from commerce that depends on communication technologies, and shutting down those networks can be self-sabotaging). However, Shirky’s conclusions in this article are more closely aligned with Gladwell’s faithful rendition of traditional democratic values than he might notice behind the glare of their technological medium: Gladwell values traditional forms of activism, and Shirky values traditional ideas about a literate citizenry needing access to a free and open public sphere. Raising the question of technology’s relationship to democratic social movements and how we should understand technology to be intervening in the democratic transformations of nations, their debate reflects the evolving trajectory of the digital literacy myth and recalls its roots in the print-based literacy myth

that preceded it. Here, the ideological tracks of democracy and literacies and their technologies are at a crossroads brought on by our co-existing national projects of exporting democracy and brokering technologies in order to fulfill neoliberal ambitions and satisfy U.S. economic agendas. Where the original literacy myth projected the economic mobility of the individual and the promise of a more complete national democratic landscape with the rise of literacy, the digital literacy myth in its global context is taken up not only in the domestic sphere, but also with respect to foreign policy, or “21<sup>st</sup> century statecraft,” as Hilary Clinton has called it.

What the Shirky-Gladwell debate reveals is that at times the dual ideological commitments of the digital literacy myth lose their cohesion. Carefully paying attention to the debate, to heed Selfe’s advice, helps us further trace the ideological trafficking of the digital literacy myth and its internal tensions. Additionally, the debate neglects the actual bodies of the protesters who are acting (virtually and in embodied ways) at the sites of conflict. The bodies that *do* get invoked among these articles are those of Americans in the Civil Rights era, where Gladwell is scripting democratic processes as only legitimate and effective when embodied. Hence, American bodies are recognized for their political agency, where actual bodies in Iran, as well as in Moldova, the Arab Spring, and the Occupy movements are erased from this representation about the legitimate use of technology in their protest efforts. Women’s bodies, among others, are lost in the crack of the myth, as the ideologies of digital optimism and democracy are cross-trafficked in conflicting ways.

Moving beyond the binary question about technology and democracy, to get at the actual impact of social media in connection with a diffuse global public, Sassen writes that what is at stake in the question of technology and social action “is not so much the possibility of such political practices,” as it is the “magnitude, scope and simultaneity: the technologies, the institutions, and the imaginaries that mark the current global digital context inscribe local political practice with new meanings and new potentialities” (370). In this way, Sassen agrees with Shirky’s more subtle point about the spreading of an ambiance of an active global public, one which bridges a given local political event with a global consciousness that is ready to participate in, watch, and discuss local events on a geopolitically distributed level. In this way, even the most critical theorists are driven to ask the question about how technologies shape us just as we shape them, and what opportunities and challenges arise therein. In other words, it is not only neoliberalism’s interests that are served through the trafficking of a digital literacy myth that promises economic progress and an enhanced democracy. The dream of digital technologies and their literacies’ potential to rescue us remains compelling—even for those who describe technology as serving capitalism and its attendant material costs for the lived realities of those who pay for the profits of the few.<sup>3</sup> The digital literacy myth permeates narratives of technology even in those whose work is explicitly critical of such ideological traffic.<sup>4</sup>

By networking arguments, however, we can make visible the prevailing and powerful grand narratives about technology, narratives that are informed by U.S. political and economic interests and strategy for an evolving global market. Tracing the ideological traffic of the digital literacy myth confirms that technology’s role and impact in social uprising cannot, as Sassen advocates, be separated from microcontexts. My analysis of the Western media coverage of the 2009 protests above reflects

our urge to see the teleological fruit of technology as granting global democracy, while the Shirky/Gladwell debate reveals that even among more skeptical accounts about the use of technology for democratic ends, flattened narratives offer disembodied, decontextualized claims that serve better to reveal ideological traffic than to investigate the actual use of technology in the locations that brought on the debate in the first place. As I continue to develop below, in the microcontext of the Iranian election protests, when we do traffic (and thus preserve) ideologies like the digital literacy myth, we allow cultural scripts and unacknowledged political and economic interests not of our own choosing to speak and act through us.

Since these narratives collect and work in the world, scholars must take notice of their transgressions and reveal the consequences of such trafficking. While the interests of global economic and state powers work through One-Third world readings of such powerful global events, scholars can use an analytic like Dingo's networking arguments to ameliorate the unintended and invisible effects of such narratives, particularly for the women of the Two-Thirds world. The flattening of political complexities during the Iranian election protests for the sake of trafficking ideas of democratic technologies *costs*, among other things, richer accounts of women's agencies in digital and bodily contexts, in solidarity both within and beyond the borders of Iran. To combat such flattened narratives and recover a contextualized representation of specific bodies in the 2009 Iranian election protests, my analysis below works to recognize the complex roles of women and technology in the social movement.

## WOMEN IN THE IRANIAN ELECTION PROTESTS

Critiquing the discourse on social media in the Iranian election protests in her *Time* article "The Twitter Devolution," Golnaz Esfandiari bashes early accounts for their inaccuracy, overzealousness, and lazy reporting. She argues that such narratives have "been a terrible injustice to the Iranians who have made real, not remote or virtual, sacrifices in pursuit of justice (Esfandiari). In fact, Westerners claiming that technology *gave* agency and power to Iranian activists are asking the wrong question and gathering the wrong answers. In their efforts to maintain and support rhetorics of hope for the democratic promise of technologies and their literacies, Western narratives have eclipsed a much more interesting and more profound, historically rooted and contextually emergent understanding of technology's role in the election protests.

One, among many, of the kinds of narratives that could have been told in place of those that transfer agency from Iranians to technologies, is that of the unprecedented numbers of women involved in the campaigning, organizing, and protests surrounding the 2009 elections. In fact, the reduced worth of women's bodies articulated in the Iranian legal system was among the most significant political and social questions at stake in the outcome in this election, and hence one of the most significant causes for the protests. In this section, I draw upon transnational feminism to "place micro-examples within macrocontexts" in order to "consider not only a woman's local circumstances but also how vectors of power—supranational policies, colonial history, global economic structures, even our practices here in the West—shape women's lives in disparate places" (Dingo 144). I return

dimension to the flattened Western narratives described above through an analysis of Iranian women's history of activism in recent decades and during the protests, placing examples of #IranElection tweets within their historical context.

That women were involved in the protests is less novel than the ways in which they united and built coalitions to make demands for their rights. In the three months leading up to the election, over 40 organizations and 700 individuals came together to form the group Convergence of Women, demanding that candidates consent to and implement the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women<sup>5</sup> (CEDAW), and that they reform those aspects of the constitution and legal system under which women are unequal to men. A portrayal of the rich ways women used their available means to shape political outcomes breathes much greater life into the 2009 protests and helps us understand that the use of technology at the time was a likely next step given the ways that women and men were building upon already established social networks of all kinds to realize their political agency. Additionally, the presence of women's bodies in the protests and online reflects the fact that embodiment as a form of political agency is not limited to physical or national borders.

#### *Momentum in Iranian Women's Activism*

Since the 1979 revolution, Iranian women have been actively organizing and expanding policy reforms to better their social position and systemic rights. Among the most significant accomplishments has been the increase in literacy rates among women from 38% in 1980 to 70% in 2000 overall, with impressive rates of 91% in the age group of 15-24 (Moruzzi 11). Under President Khatami, we see a shift in policy language from that in *The First Economic, Social, Cultural Development Plan of the Islamic Republic (1989-93)*, where goals included "bringing about a higher level of participation among women in social, cultural, educational and economic affairs, while maintaining the values of the family and the character of Muslim women" (qtd. in Tazmini 67). According to the Centre for Women's Participation's *National Report on Women's Status in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Iran's educational priorities under Khatami include "modifying educational materials in order to portray the correct image of women's roles in the family and society, and of the mutual rights of women, men, and the family at all levels," as well as "revising existing education laws that are gender biased" (67), and "teaching management skills to women with the aim of enhancing their participation in the sphere of decision-making" (68). These shifts at the policy level were occurring in conjunction with the reform movement begun in 1997, when women's participation in the presidential election campaign, appointment, and election to positions of public office were reaching unprecedented levels (Tazmini 68-69; Haghghatoo 15). And, while none of the 42 women who registered to vie for the 2009 presidential candidacy were approved by the Guardian Council, the role of women's issues in the presidential campaigning showed a promise for possible change, thanks in part to the One Million Signatures campaign.

Evolving out of this history of activism and change, the One Million Signatures campaign emerged in August 2006. The campaign was unique in its issue-based approach; its one goal was the reform of gender-discriminatory laws that seep down through Iranian society and help shape

the social imaginary that defines women's roles and acceptable treatment of women. Seeking to end legal polygamy to preserve women's rights as the sole beneficiaries of the economic advantages of marriage, to reform alimony law to better ensure that women will be financially protected when husbands divorce them, and to put an end to honor killings, the activists of the One Million Signatures campaign sought to gain support through means of "nonviolent street politics" (Khorasani 42). Activists used the networks already established within their daily lives to share information and gain support through face-to-face encounters in friends' homes, hair salons, and other public gathering spaces (42-44). According to co-founder Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, the campaign's choice to embody an issue-based approach utilizing tactics that are already embedded in volunteers' daily lives helped avoid fights over ideology and identity politics that have presented deep challenges for prior waves of Iranian feminist activity.

Contrasting the 1979 revolution with the activist mood of 2009, Khorasani writes: "one need only look at all the images from this past June showing long lines of demonstrators in which millions of young men and women freely mix with one another, standing shoulder to shoulder in a way that was hardly in evidence during the last days of the Shah's regime or the first days of Khomeini's" (91). Khorasani's discussion of the process and success of the One Million Signature's campaign describes how women volunteers (and even some men) moved their bodies among their social networks in order to spread the message of legal reform. The in-person nature of the movement was especially significant because women are defined as half-persons throughout the Iranian laws that the campaign sought to reform. Charges of adultery, for instance, according to Article 74 of the Penal Code, "whether punishable flogging or stoning, may be proven by the testimony of four just men or that of three just men and two just women" (136). Women's bodies are similarly valued at half that of men's in Iran's legal code, such as in Article 300: "The blood money for the first- or second-degree murder of a Muslim woman is half that of a murdered Muslim man" (137). The presence of a woman volunteer speaking out against such laws works to affirm her own wholeness; the woman-to-woman direct education and the solidarity and plurality represented by the signatures stand in dismissal of those Iranian laws that reduce women's value to half that of men's. My focus on women's bodies here is not to contain their worth in the body, but conversely to demonstrate that Western and One-Third world rhetorics about digital technologies and their literacies have material consequences, particularly for women when their bodies are erased by rhetorics of technology's agency.

The One Million Signatures Campaign is, in part, based upon a belief that changing Iranian legal culture will help shift the social dynamic within which women do not have the freedoms for which they are organizing. As the campaign evolved, building on their face-to-face and volunteer-education based tactics, organizers added an online component to their canvassing and tapped into the changing landscape of election politics to advance their cause. As the One Million Signatures campaign and the Convergence gained support, presidential candidates Mousavi and Karroubi were compelled to—or, in the very least saw the political advantage available in the choice to—publicly commit to supporting reform of women's rights upon election. The Internet was one tool at the disposal of the Convergence and the One Million Signatures Campaign, but it was hardly the most significant and is in any case a tool fraught with a conflicted role in Iranian history.

*A Tempered Account of Social Media in the Election Protests*

Internet access and use is situated within a complex political and social history of post-revolutionary Iran, whose combination of democratic and Islamist governmental structure has struggled to balance interests as a developing nation working to maintain profits from oil exports while gaining footing in the global economy and preserving an authentic Islamic cultural character independent against Western/colonial impingement. In *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran*, Anabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany describe the conflicting social and economic factors shaping Iran's relationship with the web, showing that "private capital is challenging the monopoly of the state as government policies slowly adapt to the marketization and privatization of the communication sector, while the broader national and international contexts make for an intriguing mix of internet and media developments" (3). Noting the generally repressed political environment during the expansion of the Internet in Iran, they explain that "the state remains significant as the primary actor in engineering political legitimacy and the definer of the 'national' character and culture" (86). State control in this case, they argue, can be explained not by general Islamic principles, "but rather as the evolution of different periods of the post-revolutionary polity" (87). And yet through the policing of public and political organizing by the state, the Iranian government (particularly under Ahmadinejad) may have actually pushed people toward disembodied political expression via the Internet. As Sreberny and Khiabany put it, "by keeping people indoors, with little to do but fiddle with computers, the regime helped to induce a generation of digital adepts, the consequences of which it was to rue in the summer of 2009" (116). In other words, the conservative and progressive blocks in the political mood of post-revolutionary Iran, combined with its economic interests in joining and profiting from the global market, has resulted in a complicated scene for activism where it must hide in plain sight along already established social routes while also taking to the online global public of the Blogosphere and Twittersverse.

While the Western narratives I discuss above carry the ideological traffic of the digital literacy myth by declaring that Twitter *gave* Iranians a voice, in fact, the idea that Twitter formed the protests, that this was a "Twitter revolution," or even that Iranians from within Iran were tweeting much at all during the protests has been heavily disputed. Sreberny and Khiabany write that "so much of the tweeting, as is increasingly the case with much media content, is a repost or commentary on previously published material. Twitter functioned mainly as a huge echo chamber of solidarity messages from global voices that simply slowed the general speed of traffic" (175). Years later, it seems that far less tweeting than initially described was actually occurring from within Iran at all. Rather, the Iranian diaspora, Green Movement sympathizers, and certainly Westerners, who read the protesters' actions as a sign of affirmation for their own views on democracy, used Twitter to circulate what information they could and to join in the cause symbolically and from afar.

Within the #IranElection conversation, individual tweeters became nodal points for the movement, facilitating the geographical spread of its public reach. Recognizing and tapping into the buzz about Twitter's role in the protests, The Web Ecology Project tracked over two million #IranElection tweets between June 7<sup>th</sup> and June 27<sup>th</sup> (the release date of their report) to trace what

they describe as “the Twitter web ecology” (1). The study found that almost 60% of those tweeting during their sample period contributed only once to the conversation, that over 65% of the tweets came from the top 10% most avid participants, and that 25% of the tweets were retweets of someone else’s content (1). User @Dominiquerdr, for instance, posted 2,817 tweets about Iran between June 7<sup>th</sup> and June 29<sup>th</sup> (6). While she was the top tweeter in the conversation during that time, her own content was only retweeted 314 times in those 18 days, revealing her relative lack of influence among the Twitter web ecology participants (7).

During the protests and in many months following, expatriate and Canadian-Iranian @Dominiquerdr listed Tehran as her location, and yet, she located herself transnationally through her linguistic choices. This tweeter wrote in French, English, and Farsi, linking to articles and websites in all three languages, sometimes using several languages in one tweet. Around the time of the protests, @Dominiquerdr had over 3,700 followers, and had tweeted over 200,000 times. Given the number, and drawing on observable data such as the Twitter users’ names, locations, and languages used, we can see that this single tweeter helped to orchestrate a network that crossed languages, national boundaries, and oceans. While @Dominiquerdr was not physically present in Iran during the protests, she was able to connect to the political body of Iranians and the Iranian diaspora via her work in curating ideas and information through her tweets, reflecting that women both within and outside of Iran drew upon available networks to exercise their political agency during the protests. Considering that each of her 3,700 followers had their own networks as well, we can see how huge the potential circulation is, and why it is tempting when describing Twitter as a political public sphere to attribute agency to the platform itself.

@Dominiquerdr’s work during the protests and in service of the movement following that summer and autumn further reflects how individual users can apply different tactics afforded by the Twitter interface, which allow the ideological and on-the-ground coordinating of a movement within publics that produce and circulate 140-character texts. A single tweet can reference multiple authors or circulators, report immediate events, link to media containing news, facts, unsanctioned stories of the people, instructions for future gatherings, and much more. Drawing on Twitter’s ability to share links to photos, videos, and articles, users organized and maintained active and growing networks, sharing information and circulating ideological materials that attested to the movement’s strength and endurance. Among the most tweeted in the days following the 2009 election (in English, Farsi, and French) were links to media about Neda Agha-Soltan, a young woman who was shot by a sniper during a demonstration. Her name meaning “voice” in Farsi, Neda quickly became a symbol of the Green Movement. Viewers in Iran and around the world have been able to watch this woman’s death on YouTube as her body begins to fail in the wake of a bullet wound, her voice coach and frantic strangers by her side. Neda’s death was taken up and circulated in part because of the political symbolism Iranian protesters were able to graft onto her body. Participants and sympathizers of the Green Movement constructed images that transformed the death of Neda’s body into a symbol of hope or fear for the body of Iran, as I explore in the following examples.<sup>6</sup>

In this image, (Fig. 1) Neda appears in black and white, an orb of white glowing behind her head, perhaps indicating her innocence. The caption: “We are all Neda” moves beyond solidarity to



Fig. 1. We Are All Neda.

homogeneity and consubstantiality. The creator and circulators of the image portray that in the eyes of the militarized Ahmadinejad regime, any Iranian body is subject to death for speaking out or standing up for their freedom.

Figure 2 bears a black and white rendering of Neda’s face covered in blood. This still from the video footage of her death was used in many such images, as protesters sought to capture the light leaving her eyes. The blood patterns on her face obscure her own vision and our vision of her, signaling perhaps the

ensorship of Iranian (women’s) bodies under the tyranny of Ahmadinejad and his *basij* (the morality police). The background reflects the representative color of the Green Movement, and the text “Where Is My Vote” was a common slogan used to challenge the legitimacy of the election. Neda’s image featured with the slogan rhetorically presents the value of a body as a voice in a democracy. Here, they seem to shout, both have been extinguished.

In perhaps the most overt example (Fig. 3), Neda’s image has been overlaid with the Iranian flag. Her clothing has been replaced with the green, white, and red of the flag like a second skin. The symbol of Iran, featured in the middle of the flag, covers the center of her face, almost like a target. Blood splatters appear in the foreground, layered



Fig. 2. Where is My Vote?

above her body and the flag. The red of the blood nearly blends with the red of the flag. At once, this image seems to suggest that Neda’s body is one with the body of the Iranian people, and that the current Iranian state had targeted that body.



Fig. 3. Neda in Blood.

As the final image indicates (Fig. 4), Neda’s bloodied body was taken up as a symbol not just virtually, but in on-the-ground protests as well. For the Green Movement, to visualize and make present Neda’s dying body at the sites of protest was a strategy to keep alive the voice and the vote that were symbolically and actually extinguished with her death.

In these ways, Neda's death was taken up and re-presented as the death of the Iranian democratic body. As feminist and Iranian scholar Nayereh Tohidi explains:

Neda's characteristics are representative of some of the demographic, gender, and class orientations of the current civil rights movement in Iran. Her young age (27 years old) reminds us of the 70 percent of Iran's population below age 30 who are faced with increasing rates of unemployment, socio-political repression, and humiliation should Ahmadinejad's repressive and militaristic policies continue for another four years. (8)

The protesters, Green Movement supporters and Iranian diaspora saw Neda's body as the embodiment of their desire for freedom from political repression, and they used that body digitally for their



Fig. 4. Image of Neda's body at protest.

purposes. They consistently circulated articles about her life and the family she left behind, links to the video of her death, and her iconized image on Twitter. In the recent years leading up to and following circulation of Neda's body and blood and final breaths on the Internet, Iran was seeing an "increasing number of women who are beaten, injured, killed, or arrested as political prisoners since the June 12 upheavals" (Tohidi 7). In reality, the

circulation of Neda's death did reflect the growing frequency of state violence against the bodies of women who use their political voices in Iran. What this more tempered consideration of tweets surrounding the protests reveals is that Twitter can be understood as a space where texts can articulate and be articulated by a global public—too diffuse to be snuffed out, yet too rhizomatous to guarantee success in any given purpose. And, when considering Twitter's aptness for political purposes, we cannot extract the platform's usefulness from its historical context; in fact, when we do so we miss the most significant indicators of its impact.

## CONCLUSION

In the case of the 2009 Iranian election protests, stories covering "the Twitter revolution" eclipsed more significant and accurate accounts of technologies and how activists employed them. Trafficking the digital literacy myth, those accounts obscured more reflective analyses of the most significant political networks, many of which had been built from the ground up by women in recent years and without which no political movement would have had footing for demonstrations of such scale. In debating to what extent the role of social media can be used in service of democratic movements, for instance, Gladwell and Shirky's exchange eclipses the fact that images of Neda's body—dying and bloodied in the midst of a revolutionary protest—came to reflect the very political body of Iran, particularly through its circulation across social media networks and geopolitical borders.

Nor did such accounts recognize the ways in which Iranian women worked with strategies of embodiment and disembodied activism to heal and make whole legal devaluations of women's bodies in the legal architecture of the nation. Flattened narratives about the democratic promise of Twitter for Iran similarly made opaque the complex history of feminist activism in Iran, and the difficult position a global network such as Twitter casts for a locally rooted movement. Describing the One Million Signatures Campaign's conflicting goals with regard to networking with transnational feminist groups, for instance, Khorasani expressed significant anxiety about joining with transnational movements, recognizing the need to balance local knowledge and experience with global power and influence (78). Cooptation is merely one risk of opening a movement up to global networks of solidarity. In these ways and more, Western narratives of the Iranian election protests that touted Twitter's democratic results for the women and men of Iran failed us all.

In *Territory, Authority, Rights*, Sassen contends with "easy generalizations" about economic globalization, particularly the notion that the state is in decline due to a distinct set of global forces that act upon the declining nation-state with predetermined consequences of neoliberalism, opening of markets, and the fall of the welfare state. Rather, Sassen argues that we must conceive of the effects of globalization in terms of variation, since global forces "confront considerable national specificity" (227). Fear of decline in economic and innovative status might be one motivating factor explaining the current saturation of the digital literacy myth, with its promise for the economic progress of the One-Third world and in compatibility with specifically Western versions of democratic progress.

When we network the economic and political interests contained within the digital literacy myth with reductive Western accounts of a "Twitter Revolution" that obscures any historical context for technology or activism in Iran—and one which overlooks significant stories about the role of women, women's bodies and technology in protest—we can tie such narratives to fear about the decline of the U.S. in the future global economy, a fear that motivates and sustains the digital literacy myth. The deeper our fear, perhaps, the louder our hope. The result of this ideological trafficking, as I have shown, is the rhetorical erasure of the political agency and embodied realities of actual human agents in the democratic processes the Western commentators describe. Realities of women's activism, in a geopolitical region that the West is often quick to point out as particularly oppressive to women, are disembodied and erased in narratives that traffic ideologies of technology and democracy in service of Western interests. Those interested in challenging the material and political consequences of rhetorics of hope for technology should continue to network arguments about its use toward democracy across borders in order to challenge and prevent similar ideologically motivated erasures.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In Shirky's use of the term, "flat" refers to horizontal networks of agency and power wherein action can originate from and move through other nodes in the network fluidly and with spontaneity, as opposed to how power moves in a top-down hierarchical model. My own use of the word "flattened," usually referring to narratives, describes ways in which global/local histories, material realities, and complex distributions of agency across contexts are collapsed in representations that seek or work to circulate a particular ideology or series of political commitments, especially when located in a transnational gaze from a One-Third world nation to a Two-Thirds world.

<sup>2</sup> This equation is an extension of the implicit ideological and economic agenda of the Clinton Administration's technological literacy plan, articulated by Selfe in *Technology and Literacy in the 21st Century* as: "science + technology + democracy (+ capitalism) + education = progress + literate citizenry (122-3).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Hardt and Negri's *Empire* trilogy, wherein they argue that the tools and requirements of the worker-subject in the global era can become the tools through which the multitude reclaims the common.

<sup>4</sup> This project began with my own awe at Twitter's democratic power in the Iranian election protests in 2009, in fact. It has only been under careful reflection and guidance from outside readers that I've come to explicitly critique these rhetorics.

<sup>5</sup> It's important to note that the United States has also declined to ratify CEDAW.

<sup>6</sup> These images have been circulated so vastly that their origins are obscure and beside the point. For that reason, I offer no citation for them.

## WORKS CITED

- Alexander, M. Jacqui. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. Print.
- Ambinder, Marc. "The Revolution Will Be Twittered." *The Atlantic*, 15 June 2009. Web. 11 March 2014. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2009/06/the-revolution-will-be-tweeted/19376/>
- Clinton, Hillary R. "Remarks on Internet Freedom." The Newseum, Washington, D.C. 21 Jan. 2010. Public Address.
- Dingo, Rebecca. *Networking Arguments: Rhetoric, Transnational Feminism, and Public Policy Writing*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2012. Print. Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture.
- Esfandiari, Golnaz. "The Twitter Devolution." *Foreign Policy* 7 June 2010. Web. 11 March 2014.
- Gladwell, Malcolm. "Small Change." *The New Yorker* 4 Oct. 2010. Web. 11 March 2014.
- Graff, Harvey. *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth Century City*. New York: Academic P, 1979. Print.
- Grossman, Lev. "Iran Protests: Twitter, the Medium of the Movement." *Time*, 17 June 2009. Web. 11 March 2014.
- Haghighatjoo, Fatemeh. "Women in Iran's Green Movement: Their Role in the 2009 Presidential Election Protests." *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*, 15-17.
- Hwang, Tim, et. al. "The Iranian Election on Twitter: The First Eighteen Days." *Web Ecology Project*, 2009: n. pag. Web. 24 Feb. 2010. <http://www.webecologyproject.org/2009/06/iran-election-on-twitter/>
- Khorasai, Noushin Ahmadi. *Iranian Women's One Million Signatures Campaign for Equality: The Inside Story*. Bethesda, MD: Women's Learning Partnership, 2009.
- Morozov, Evgeny. *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*. New York: Public Affairs, 2011. Print.
- Moruzzi, Norma Claire. "Quiet Leadership and Pressure from Below: Women's Participation in Iranian Public Life." *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars* 10-14.
- Parr, Ben. "Mindblowing #IranElection Stats: 221,744 Tweets Per Hour at Peak." *Mashable* June 17, 2009. Web. <http://mashable.com/2009/06/17/iranelection-crisis-numbers/>
- Poniewozik, James. "Iranians Protest Election, Tweeps Protest CNN." *Time*, 15 June 2009. Web. <http://entertainment.time.com/2009/06/15/iranians-protest-election-tweeps-protest-cnn/>
- Queen, Mary. "Transnational Feminist Rhetorics in a Digital World." *College English* 70.5 (2008): 471-89. Print.
- Rawlinson, Linnie. "Protesters Always Early Adopters of Technology." *CNN.com*, 1 April 2009. Web. 11 May 2010.
- Sassen, Saskia. *Territory, Authority, Rights : From Medieval to Global Assemblages*. Princeton, N.J.; Woodstock: Princeton UP, 2008. Print.
- Selfe, Cynthia. *Technology and Literacy in the 21st Century: The Importance of Paying Attention*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1999. Print.
- Shirky, Clay. "The Political Power of Social Media." *Foreign Affairs*. 20 Dec. 2010. Web. 11 March 2014. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67038/clay-shirky/the-political-power-of-social-media>.
- Sreberny, Anabelle and Gholam Khiabany. *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran*. London: I.B.

- Tauris, 2010. Print.
- Stone, Brad, and Noam Cohen. "Social Networks Spread Defiance Online." *The New York Times* 16 June 2009. Web. 11 March 2014.
- Street, Brian. *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge UP, 1984. Print.
- Sullivan, Andrew. "The Revolution Will Be Twittered." *The Atlantic*, 13 June 2009. Web. 11 March 2014. <http://www.theatlantic.com/daily-dish/archive/2009/06/the-revolution-will-be-twittered/200478/>
- Tazmini, Ghoncheh. *Khatami's Iran: The Islamic Republic and the Turbulent Path to Reform*. London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2009. Print.
- Tohidi, Nayereh. "Iran's Presidential Elections: Women's Role in the Pre- and Post-Election Politics." Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars 4-9.
- "Twitter Links Iran Protesters to Outside World." *Fox News* 16 June 2009. Web. 11 Mar. 2014. . <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2009/06/16/twitter-links-iran-protesters-to-outside-world/>
- The Web Ecology Project. *The Iranian Election on Twitter: The First Eighteen Days*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Web Ecology Project, 2009. Print.
- Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. *Women in the Iranian Election Campaign and and Protest*. Middle East Program Occasional Paper Series. Washington, D.C.: 2009. Print.
- U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology. *Getting America's Students Ready for the 21st Century: Meeting the Technology Literacy Challenge* . National Education Technology Plan. Washington D.C.: 1996. Print.

# Beyond Critique: Global Activism and the Case of Malala Yousafzai

Phyllis Mentzell Ryder George Washington University

## KEYWORDS

Malala Yousafzai, neoimperialism, subaltern studies, global activism, media critique

On October 9, 2012, a Talib boy stopped a small school bus in the Swat Valley of Pakistan and asked, “Who is Malala?” Though no one spoke, he identified Malala when the girls nervously glanced at her. Then he shot her in the head. She survived, miraculously, after an ordeal that included Pakistani national helicopters; a Saudi Arabian jet; a hospital in Birmingham, England; and multiple surgeries. A year later, she published her memoir *I am Malala* and toured the world. When Malala spoke to the United Nations on her sixteenth birthday, she conveyed the same message that had garnered the attention of the Taliban in the first place: girls everywhere have a right to education; girls will demand it.

The media coverage of Malala in the United States and Europe has been unabashedly doting. ABC’s Diane Sawyer, NPR’s Michel Martin, and CNN’s Christiane Amanpour, among many others, praised her bravery and her perseverance. When she was a guest on *The Daily Show*, host Jon Stewart was rendered speechless by her principled responses: she would not raise even her shoe to a Talib, she said. Instead, we should “fight others . . . through peace, and through dialog, and through education” (4:20). Stewart joked that he’d like to adopt her. This interview has been viewed over two million times. *I am Malala* remained on the *New York Times* Bestseller list for twenty-one weeks. The European Union awarded Malala Yousafzai The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. In 2014, she received the Nobel Peace Prize—the youngest person ever to do so.

But the response to this response has been less celebratory. Critics, while impressed with Malala and her courage, question why she is a darling of the Western media. “Why Malala?” asks Fatima Bhutto, niece to the late Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, in an otherwise positive book review in *The Guardian*: Why not “Noor Aziz, eight years old when killed by a drone strike in Pakistan” or others killed by drones in Yemen or Iraq? Murtaza Hussain’s answer in *Al Jazeera* is blunt: “Since Malala was a victim of the Taliban, she, despite her protestations, [is] seen as a potential tool of political propaganda to be utilized by war advocates.” Ibrahim Khan, a senator and leader in Pakistan’s Islamic Jamaat-e-Islami party, warns in a *Washington Post* article, “She is now being used—rather, misused—in the West by portraying a wrong image of Pakistan as a violent and anti-women society” (Craig and Meshud).

Because the West was able to scurry Malala out of Pakistan and into the safety of England, her

story fits a typical narrative: the West rescues poor (Muslim) women from the edge of civilization. Likewise, Malala's cause—access to education for all girls and boys around the world—fits another popular Western story that education is the (only) necessary precursor to democracy. As if the deteriorating infrastructure of Pakistani civil society is unrelated to the harsh conditions of the International War on Terror. As if access to information is enough to create agency, power, and the legal infrastructures of equality. The story told about Malala obscures broader, critical analysis of the conditions that led to her cause or her attempted murder.

Critique of the coverage of Malala rightly cautions viewers not to fall for the typical narratives of imperialist discourse. I understand this critique; I find it accurate and valuable. But I am frustrated that the critique ends there. Indeed, given our understanding that *any* hegemonic discourse appropriates everything it can, I find the media coverage distressing but unremarkable. What distresses me more, however, is that the analysis focuses only on how Malala has been re-written by the West. Well-intentioned as it might be, the critique positions "appropriated activists" as helpless victims. It "smacks of a patriarchal nature," as Omid Safi has said: "No amount of analysis or concern—even righteous concern—should take away from [Malala's] agency, her will, and her resistance. To negate her agency, even by would-be allies, is yet another attempt to negate her humanity."

Instead of noting only *that* such appropriation happens, I want to look at another part of this question: Given that any hegemonic discourse appropriates everything, can critics do more than describe that appropriation? Is it possible to make visible moments of resistance, moments of potential agency? More specifically, when we examine Malala's actions and rhetoric, can we identify any counter-narratives, places where she exceeds the stories told about her? To begin to answer this question, I study Malala's performance in her US appearances between July 2013 (when she spoke to the UN) and October 2013 (when her book was published and she was nominated for the Peace Prize.) I argue that even as Malala relies on Western media to circulate her message, she persistently disrupts its dominant messages. The role of critics, then, should be to amplify these disruptions.

## CAN MALALA SPEAK? CRITICAL CONCEPTS FOR POSTCOLONIAL ANALYSIS

Malala, as Western audiences know her, serves the ideological purposes of a dominant power in ways typical of imperialist appropriation. In this case, Western media re-presents Malala so that her story justifies military intervention in Afghanistan, drone strikes in Pakistan, continued antipathy for all Muslims, pity for Muslim women, and a belief that Pakistan would be better off if the country adopted Western ideals of secularism, capitalism, and liberal democracy. For decades, such trends have been exposed, named, traced, and fought by scholars and activists in postcolonial studies, a field which examines how oppressed people are controlled by and resist the dominant culture. A concept central to postcolonial studies, *subalternity* provides a useful structure for analyzing the coverage of Malala.

The term *subaltern* is thought to originate with Marxist scholar Antonio Gramsci, who uses it to refer to people who are outside of power and without access to systems of cultural reproduction

(Hall). Theorizing (from prison) about how Italian workers might resist Mussolini's National Fascist Party, Gramsci argued that oppressive power is secured not only through physical coercion, but also through *cultural hegemony*: ideas and dispositions are perpetuated in schools, religion and so on; through them, the oppressed consent to their conditions (Hall 18-19). Gramsci was interested in those among the working class who are *not* compelled by that cultural hegemony; he called them *organic intellectuals* (Hall 20-21). How do organic intellectuals extend such class consciousness, he asked, given that they do not have access to political or cultural institutions through which to disseminate their perspective. Within Gramsci's framework, the *subaltern* are marginalized, class-conscious individuals with no access to tools or institutions of circulation.

When Gayatri Spivak joined the conversation six decades later, she called out the lack of self-reflection that she saw among subaltern scholars who continued to pursue this question. The language anyone uses to talk about or for the subaltern is not neutral, she observes; neither are the epistemologies of academic inquiry (275). For Spivak, intellectuals—even "benevolent" ones—establish their own central positions by selectively defining Others. She sees a great danger of "first-world intellectual(s) masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves" (292). Scholars can never represent the subaltern, she says; at best, they re-present them (275).

In particular, Spivak warns that re-presentations of the subaltern continue to presume a unified and homogenous "subaltern voice" among colonized people. She warns against essentializing the subaltern, particularly in terms of class identities. Her concern is not just that oppressed groups have to use the dominant discourses to speak, but that intellectuals then try to separate out the "real" voice, the authentic speaker, from the dominant discourse. The "real" subaltern voice that postcolonial scholars would advance is no more pure or trustworthy than those of the discourse they critique.

Postcolonial scholars continue to identify mechanisms through which non-Western perspectives are unseen, ignored or distorted by Western (political, economic, cultural, and academic) actors, and raise a host of questions about how Malala represents herself and whom she claims to represent. But the line of inquiry I take up examines not Malala but rather those who claim to represent her. When postcolonial writers and activists critique the Western re-presentations of Malala, how well have they reflected on their own part in shaping this overall media event? I examine the coverage of the coverage to consider what is left out, what potential moments of resistance Malala provides which are not taken up by the critical analysis. I call on progressives to amplify *that* message instead of only the message of imperialism.

Recognizing the impossibility of this task, I nevertheless attempt it here. I don't presume to fully "hear" Malala. My analysis of her work is based on articles and interviews already refracted through the lens of media coverage, a memoir that was ghost-written with a Western journalist and my own location as a white, US academic. My review has come through English-language materials. I have selected only some components of the broader picture, and I have left out much, both because of the constraints of space and because, I am sure, I have not seen it. My goal here is not to identify the "real" Malala or to suggest that anyone could put forward her "real" intentions or identity. Rather, my goal is to examine, carefully, some of the potential alternative representations that I see circulating in

the accounts, and, by doing so, to model some strategies critics can use to amplify counter-narratives.

## RHETORICAL RESISTANCE: MUSLIM IDENTITIES ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

### *Malala and the White Savior Complex*

In his *Huffington Post* piece, “Malala Yousafzai and the White Saviour Complex,” Assed Baig notes the racial and gender overtones of the Western coverage of the Taliban attack:

This is a story of a native girl being saved by the white man. Flown to the UK, the Western world can feel good about itself as they save the native woman from the savage men of her home nation. It is a historic racist narrative that has been institutionalised. Journalists and politicians were falling over themselves to report and comment on the case. The story of an innocent brown child that was shot by savages for demanding an education and along comes the knight in shining armour to save her. The actions of the West, the bombings, the occupations the wars all seem justified now, “see, we told you, this is why we intervene to save the natives.”

Although he does not mention her, Baig has forwarded Spivak here quite directly. In “Can the Subaltern Speak,” she poses the sentence, “White men are saving brown women from brown men” (296). On the one hand, Spivak offers this sentence to summarize the efforts of postcolonial scholars, and this is the way that Baig uses the trope. The “modern savior” vs. “primitive culture” narrative treats violence as inherent to a (savage) people, and feeds a “good Muslim” vs. “bad Muslim” dichotomy. The Taliban’s gruesome attack on Malala serves as a powerful illustration of “bad Muslims” monstrous immorality: they attacked a young girl in her school bus; all she wants is education. The line of critique that I presented in the introduction also follows this train: in asking why coverage focuses on Malala and not the other girls killed by drones or the Taliban, the critics argue that Malala is chosen because she is a good, pathetic figure who fits the story well. And so she does. But this insinuation glosses over Malala’s own agency. Which brings us back to Spivak.

When Spivak offers the sentence “White men are saving brown women from brown men,” she uses it to examine how gender works within postcolonial analysis. She wants us to notice not only the white/brown dynamic, but also the man/woman dynamic. Even as the sentence guides us to see how the “white savior” narrative strips power from the brown man, the woman in the sentence remains an object (299). No one asks her view; both the white and the brown man presume they know what she would say. This move is especially galling in the case of Malala, who had spoken out often before her attack: she and her father were frequently on the radio in Pakistan promoting their goal of education for girls; she met with Pakistani politicians at the regional and national levels; she wrote a blog for the BBC; she was featured in a *New York Times* documentary; she had been nominated for the International Peace Prize and had already received Pakistan’s first National Youth Peace Prize (Hesford, “Introduction” 412). While much Western coverage does present the Taliban as the savages from whom Malala must be rescued, she is not the agent-less, subaltern figure that the postcolonial critics seem to presume.

I'll provide a quick example of how the "white savior" critique eradicates Malala's agency. Consider a point later in Baig's *Huffington Post* piece:

I support Malala, I support the right to education for all, I just cannot stand the hypocrisy of Western politicians and media as they pick and choose, congratulating themselves for something that they have caused. Malala is the good native, she does not criticise the West, she does not talk about the drone strikes, she is the perfect candidate for the white man to relieve his burden and save the native.

Baig, it seems, hasn't thought enough of Malala to verify his claims. In her book and in her interviews, as I'll explain in more detail later, she does criticize the West. Indeed, when she met with President Obama, she told him that drones "fuel terrorism." By overlooking all this, Baig criticizes the White Savior and keeps Malala in the same agent-less position that very narrative implies.

When we look more closely at how Malala tells her own story through her book and through her interviews, we can identify some of the rhetorical strategies she uses to resist the "White Savior" story. For one, she refuses to position the Taliban as Muslim savages. For another, she implicates the West in the rise of the Taliban.

#### *Malala's Counter-Narrative: Taliban Boys and Their Mothers*

First, it's worth noting how Malala takes control of the narrative about her attack. In Malala's story, the Taliban do not get the upper hand. Malala repeatedly explains that she had thought a lot about the possibility of such a moment—she had anticipated the attack and had decided what her action would be. Even though she was not able to carry out her plan at the time—they shot her before she could speak—she tells the story at every opportunity; she gives herself an active role, which she wants her audience to adopt.

Malala consistently deflates impulse to use the brutal school bus shooting to justify revenge on the "bad Muslims." She refuses to seek violence against them. In her UN speech, she asserts, "I am not against anyone. I'm not here to speak in revenge of the Taliban or any terrorist group. I want education for the sons and daughters of the Taliban" (7:29). Each time she is asked to talk about her experience, Malala repeats that she would not even "raise a shoe" against her attackers. This is the story that knocked over Jon Stewart (whose response that he would like to adopt her, it should be noted, presumes both that she didn't already have a good father and that she would want to join Stewart's world). Malala says the same phrase, with the same inflection, in her interview with Amanpour. Malala describes how she had imagined a day when she might be shot, and the conversation she had with herself about how to respond:

First I thought I would just take my shoe and hit him. But then I said, if I hit him with a shoe, and if I become cruel to him, that means there is no difference between me and the Talib. He is also choosing a harsh way for his cause, so I shall not use that harsh way. So then I said, Malala speak to him what you have in your heart. (30:57)

Omid Safi, writing for the University of Missouri's *Religion News Service*, compares Malala's approach to the profound nonviolence and love advocated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Indeed, in

her UN speech, she hailed many philosophical ancestors:

This is the compassion that I have learnt from Muhammad—the Prophet of Mercy, Jesus Christ and Lord Buddha. This is the legacy of change that I have inherited from Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Muhammad Ali Jinnah. This is the philosophy of non-violence that I have learnt from Gandhi Jee, Bacha Khan and Mother Teresa.<sup>1</sup> And this is the forgiveness that I have learnt from my mother and father. This is what my soul is telling me, be peaceful and love everyone. (7:52)

By linking her philosophy to world religions, international leaders, Pakistani and Pashtun history and her family, Malala dispels any sense that her approach is merely a child's naiveté, or that her approach is unique to her. She calls upon a long, international history of nonviolent action to refute calls for revenge.

Malala humanizes and even feminizes the Taliban in her attempt to dismantle the revenge narrative: instead of monstrous men, they are misguided boys in a network of caring women. When Amanpour asks about the “man” who attacked her, Malala gently corrects her: “We may call him a boy. There were two boys that day. . .” (9:50). As part of her “I would not lift a shoe” story, where she talks to herself about how to respond to a potential attack, she explains that she had hoped to speak to her assailant:

So then I said [to myself], Malala . . . speak to him that you want education for their children, that you want peace for their families as well. Because we never think about their families—how their wives would be feeling, how their daughters would be feeling, how their mothers would be feeling, how hard it would be for them. Because when they leave home, when they go on their own jihad—how the feelings of their mothers would be. . . So I think we also must think about them. So that's why I want to tell Talib, be peaceful, and the real Jihad is to fight through words . . . and that is the Jihad that I am doing. (31:00-32:20)

If the Western patriarchal narrative suggests that the attack on a young girl requires a vengeful response, Malala positions her assailant within a web of women—daughters, wives, mothers—and turns the patriarchal reading upside down. You cannot help women by killing the people they love, she says. Do not protect us from cruelty by being cruel. She positions herself as part of a “we” who has been taught to deny the humanity of the Taliban, but who should take another look.

### *Malala's Counter-Narrative: Who Created the Taliban?*

At the same time, Malala does not defend the Taliban in her book. As she describes their violent intrusion into Swat Valley—the terrorism, the murders—she does not mince words. Rather than allow their brutality to serve as justification for Western intervention, however, she contextualizes their actions within broader historical international, national, and cultural conflicts. Their appeal, she suggests, is not some inherent religious message, but rather the consequence of a long series of events in which international forces have played a significant role.

In *I am Malala*, a chapter titled “The Radio Mulla” begins with the line: “I was ten when the Taliban came to our valley” (111). Malala describes the initial appeal of Maulana Fazlullah's radio messages and the subsequent terror of living in an area under his influence. She described the edicts

against certain behavior (smoking, women not being covered, women shopping) (112-119) and notes that Fazlullah "began holding a *shura*, a kind of local court," which solved local disputes through public whippings. Ultimately, he declared "two-legged animals will be sacrificed," and began killing the local khans—the feudal leaders—and secular political leaders (121). Malala describes many such killings: a friend and a local political leader (121); her teacher's husband, a local policeman (124-25); a young dancer (147); a teacher (148) and more. A photo in her book shows a man being whipped in the public square. The *New York Times* documentary shows men being shot in the head. The Taliban are not good guys here.

And yet, Malala contextualizes their actions within a broader international context. For example, early in her book, she describes how the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan triggered a US willingness to encourage the Islamization of Pakistan. Although General Zia had taken control of Pakistan in a military coup, she writes, "The Russian invasion transformed Zia from an international pariah to the great defender of freedom in the Cold War" (32). Just as General Musharraf would years later, General Zia secured his power through Islamization, and Malala insinuates an American hand in this (33). She cites a local information minister: "If we had not put guns in the hands of madrasa students at the behest of foreign powers, we would not be facing this bloodbath in the tribal areas and Swat" (173).

Perhaps more pointedly for contemporary audiences, Malala extends her critique to the US policy of sending drones into Pakistan. These acts, she says repeatedly in her book and in interviews, fuels the Taliban. The first 2004 drone attack in South Waziristan galvanized Pakistanis from across the political spectrum. Malala writes that the Radio Mullah's campaign in Swat Valley intensified after his brother and three nephews were killed in a 2006 "American drone attack on the madrasa in Bajuar" where "eighty people were killed, including boys as young as twelve" (120). Her explanation about how young men signed up to fight because of their outrage against a foreign attack seems to parallel the US response to 9/11.

When Malala met with President Obama in October 2013, she spoke to him about drones. She told the Associated Press: "I also expressed my concerns that drone attacks are fueling terrorism. Innocent victims are killed in these acts, and they lead to resentment among the Pakistani people. If we refocus efforts on education it will make a big impact" (Rucker).

Malala admits that the Taliban are bad guys. But as much as Malala decries their brutality, she resists attempts to use her story to justify drones or wars. From her perspective, Western military intervention is the exact wrong response. The right response, she insists, is education.

## RHETORICAL RESISTANCE: MUSLIM WOMEN AND POLITICAL RELIGION AS CONTESTED SITES

Education for girls, the cause that Malala brings to the UN, is presented within the discourse of international human rights. But the discourse of international human rights is not receptive to the identity of a Muslim citizen. Current human rights law views the public sphere as "the only viable place for freedom and reason," whereas religion is viewed as private, natural and uncontested

(Sunder, 266). Universal human rights law takes place *outside* of religion, and religious freedoms are left to the discretion of religious leaders.

The discourse in the Pakistan national arena is equally inadequate for making a case for a pluralist democracy and critical, civic education. Pakistani activists who seek national, political protection for human rights operate within a context of Islamization, in which extreme politico-religious groups define civic action and public space according to their own set of rules, limiting the political power of their opponents. Activists who would challenge this do so in a context where any criticism of the Taliban is dismissed as Western and anti-Islamic.

Malala takes on the challenge from two angles. First, she embraces her Muslim identity while she disputes religious arguments that would confine her role as a woman or silence her political voice. That is, she challenges claims for Islamic law based through her own reading of Muslim texts. Second, she resists Islamization by treating it as a political, rather than a religious, movement.

*Malala's Counter-Narrative: Pluralist Democracy is a Muslim Value*

In 2009, Malala agreed to write a blog for the BBC. Her choice of pen name, Gul Makai, reveals a great deal about how she sees her own role as a Muslim girl in this political struggle. As she explains in her memoir, Gul Makai is a heroine from a folk story in which a young couple from two different tribes fall in love. Unlike Romeo and Juliet, however, Gul Makai and Musa Khan do not die. Instead, "Gul Makai uses the Quran to teach her elders that war is bad and eventually they stop fighting and allow the lovers to unite" (155). Malala steps into this role of the young Muslim girl who will use her knowledge of Islam to persuade her elders to change. She challenges the idea that Islam is monolithic or that only mullahs have the power to define religious meaning. Thus, Malala engages the larger battle that Muslim activists face: the "battle over who has the right, in a democratic society, to represent the identity or social category of Muslim in matters of political, economic or cultural issues" (Jamal 68). Like feminist Muslim groups around the world, Malala offers alternative readings of the Quran that are progressive on women's issues.

In her United Nations speech, Malala performs her Muslim identity clearly. Her opening follows tradition: "*In the name of God, The Most Beneficent, The Most Merciful. . . . Assalamu 'Alaikum*"; members of her audience respond "Wa 'Alaikum Assalaam."<sup>2</sup> Then, in the speech itself, she differentiates her idea of Islam from the Taliban's version:

The terrorists are misusing the name of Islam and Pashtun society for their own personal benefits. Pakistan is peace-loving democratic country. Pashtuns want education for their daughters and sons. And Islam is a religion of peace, humanity and brotherhood. Islam says that it is not only each child's right to get education, rather it is their duty and responsibility. (9:50-10:29)

Malala depicts the Taliban as uneducated and their edicts as ignorant of the Quran. She describes the madrasses of the Taliban as places where young boys are indoctrinated by falsehoods. In contrast, she was taught to read Arabic and to study the Quran herself. In her memoir, when she explains that the Radio Mullah banned women from shopping, she counters that she had learned in school that the Prophet's first wife Kjadijah was a successful businesswoman (116). The Taliban are afraid of

education, she repeats, because it is easier to control and manipulate people who cannot read or who don't know enough history or politics to question what they are told about Islam.

*Malala's Counter-Narrative: The Taliban as a Political Party*

Along with challenging the *religious* component of the politico-religious parties who control the public sphere, Malala exposes the *political* dimensions of their actions. This move pushes back against both the Taliban and dominant Western discourse; both talk as if the Taliban's particular vision of Sharia law were intrinsic to Islam itself. In contrast, Malala's approach follows one that Amina Jamal advocates:

[I]t is important to approach Islamization as an attempt to construct a particular type of nation/society. . . . We should understand the process of Islamization as a historically situated policy that was implemented within specific socialpolitical conditions in Pakistan, rather than approaching it with reference to assumptions about Islamic revivalism or fundamentalism. (64)

Malala uses this tactic extensively.

One way that a group can secure *political* power is to appeal to "discontent with indigenous social class and cultural inequalities" (Kandiyoti qtd. in Jamal, 64). Malala identifies how the Taliban accomplishes this. Although the Taliban clamp down on the social behavior of some groups, their rhetoric appeals to other groups that have been long marginalized within the culture—those who are at the bottom of cultural hierarchies. Her description of the Radio Mullah suggests that his real appeal is not religious, but grounded in unfair class systems and weak judicial oversight. She explicitly names the class system in Swat Valley:

We Pashtuns love shoes but we don't love the cobbler; we love our scarves and blankets but do not respect the weaver. Manual workers made a great contribution to our society but received no recognition, and this is the reason so many of them joined the Taliban—to finally achieve status and power. (148)

Within a context of class hostility, Malala notes growing frustration with inadequate local courts, which provided no avenue for justice. It was this persistent oppression that the Radio Mullah tapped into: "one of [Fazlullah's] favorite subjects was the injustice of the feudal system of the khans. Poor people were happy to see the khans getting their come-uppance. They saw Fazlullah as a kind of Robin Hood" (115). The Taliban are presented as a political rather than religious group. Most significantly, those who support them are *people* who have been wrongly *persuaded* about a way to end classism; they are redeemable. The situation in Swat is one of political manipulation, not inherent evil or fundamentally Islam.

Malala treats the Taliban as a political party that consolidated its power by tapping into class rivalry and then used that power to shut down oppositional political discourse. Through this claim, she levels a critique at the highest levels of Pakistani government. As Jamal has explained, General Musharaff himself used such political maneuvering to secure his own power. Before the 2002 elections, Musharraf attempted to weaken the political strength of the two main political parties in Pakistan (run at the time by exiled leaders Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif). As a result, he created

the conditions in which politico-religious parties gained unprecedented electoral success. Musharraf then worked with these politico-religious parties to solidify his own power, creating “a military-Mullah alliance” (Jamal 62).

Perhaps the biggest indication that Malala views the issues she confronts as political is the growing political persona she has adopted. In the *New York Times* documentary, Malala first says she wants to be a doctor when she grows up; she later says she wants to be a politician. In her UN speech, she explains that she is wearing a shawl that once belonged to Benazir Bhutto. In her interview with Amanpour, Malala said she'd like to be Prime Minister of Pakistan one day (48:18).

## THE RESPONSIBILITY OF GLOBAL ACTIVISTS

For global activists to be heard—to garner the attention of global publics in the West and around the world—activists need to access Western media. Twitter and Facebook notwithstanding, Malala's reach depended on a long, slow process of creating relationships with conventional media and allowing them to extend her words through their forums. Malala explains in her interview with Amanpour,

There are different ways you can speak. Through interviews, through writing articles in newspaper, through writing blogs. And media at that time played a vital role because the world was not aware what was happening in Swat. We spoke, we raised our voice, media transported our voice, and the whole world were listening. (24:27-24:55)

To garner international and national attention to the conditions in the Swat Valley and for young people without education around the world—to rally money and political will to support education for girls of all classes in Pakistan—Malala needs to reach a global audience. She has begun to build new schools and achieve her goal of increased access to education.

I don't mean to suggest that Malala is not appropriated by Western media, or that her audiences always understand when and how she resists the media frameworks she operates in. She does not control her image; no one can. I also don't mean to suggest that Malala never aligns herself with imperialist ideologies. She has endorsed *The Girl Effect*, Nike's campaign which has been critiqued for its misogynist and consumerist framework (See Hesford, *Exceptional Children*). Nor do I know whether she is speaking for those without a voice, as she claims.

What I do want to say, however, is that Malala's story serves as an important caution to those who study the rhetorics of power and the rhetorics of resistance. As Spivak has reminded us, well-meaning academics work within the very ideology we would critique, and we must regularly examine how we forward that ideology. As we critique imperialist appropriations of voices of the global South, for example, we should not be content to use the occasion to illustrate the power of hegemony. Rather, let's return to the full context of the question that Gramsci asked so long ago: How do organic intellectuals extend their critique when they do not control those political or cultural institutions that disseminate their perspective? Gramsci and Spivak remind us to focus on the potential agency of subaltern voices. Recognizing all the many layers of cultural hegemony that get in the way—language, religion, transnational histories, along with media genres, modes of publication

and so on—the broader transnational, postcolonial project is still to figure out how anti-imperialist perspectives might circulate. With all humility and optimism, we should not lose track of that goal.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Ali Jinnah was the founder of Pakistan; Bacha Khan, a Pakistani Pashtun, was close friend of Gandhi.

<sup>2</sup>The translation is roughly “Peace be with you” and “And upon you be peace.” It’s interesting to note that the greeting and response is not captured in the official transcripts of the speech, though it is clear in the video.

## WORKS CITED

- Class Dismissed: Malala's Story*. Dir. Adam B. Ellick and Irfan Ashraf. Documentary Video. *New York Times*, 2009. 9 October 2012. Web. 12 March 2014.
- Baig, Assed. "Malala Yousafzai and the White Saviour Complex." *Huffington Post*, 13 July, 2013. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.
- Bhutto, Fatima. "I Am Malala by Malala Yousafzai – Review " *The Guardian*, 30 Oct. 2013. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.
- Craig, Tim and Saleem Meshud. "Taliban Renews Threat Against Pakistani Teen Malala Yousafzai as Nobel Decision Nears." *Washington Post*, 8 Oct. 2013. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.
- Farrell, Amy, and Patrice McDermott. "Claiming Afghan Women: The Challenge of Human Rights Discourse for Transnational Feminism." Hesford and Kozol 33-56. Print.
- Hall, Stuart. "Gramsci's Relevance in the Study of Race and Ethnicity." In *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. Eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen. New York: Routledge, 1996: 411-40. Print.
- Hesford, Wendy S. *Exceptional Children: Human Rights Rhetoric and Recognition Scenes*. Rhetoric Society of America Graduate Chapter Meeting. University of Pittsburgh, State College, PA. 11 April 2014. Video. *You Tube*, Web. 15 June 2014.
- . "Introduction: Facing Malala Yousafzai, Facing Ourselves." *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory Special Issue: Rhetorics Regulating Childhood and Children's Rights* 33.3-4. (2013): 407-24. Print.
- Hesford, Wendy S., and Wendy Kozol, Eds. *Just Advocacy? Women's Human Rights, Transnational Feminisms, and the Politics of Representation*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2005. Print.
- Hussain, Murtaza. "Malala and Nabila: Worlds Apart." *Al Jazeera.com*, 1 Nov. 2013. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.
- Jamal, Amina. "Transnational Feminism as Critical Practice: A Reading of Feminist Discourses in Pakistan." *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 5.2 (2005): 57-82. Print.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Robin L. Riley. *Feminism and War: Confronting US Imperialism*. London: Zed, 2008. Print.
- Rucker, Philip. "Malala Yousafzai Meets with the Obamas in the Oval Office " *Washington Post*, 11 Oct 2013 Web. 22 Feb. 2014.
- Safi, Omid. "How to Keep Malala from being Appropriated: 5 Points on Malala, Obama, and Jon Stewart" *Religion News Service*, 12 Oct 2013. Web. 22 Feb. 2014.
- Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988. 271-313. Print.
- Sunder, Madhavi. "Piercing the Veil." Hesford and Kozol 266-290. Print.
- Yousafzai, Malala. Interview with Christiane Amanpour *CNN.com*, 21 Oct. 2013 Web. 25 Feb. 2014.
- . Interview with Diane Sawyer. *ABC World News*, Video. *YouTube*. 7 Oct. 2013. Web. 15 Aug. 2014.
- . Interview with Jon Stewart. *The Daily Show*, Video. *Comedy Central.com*. 8 Oct. 2013. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.
- . Interview with Michele Martin. *Tell Me More. NPR.org*, 15 Oct. 2013. Web. 15 Feb. 2014.
- . "UN Speech: Girl Shot in Attack by Taliban Gives Address" *New York Times* Video. *YouTube*, Web. 15 Feb 2014.
- Yousafzai, Malala, and Christina Lamb. *I Am Malala : The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and was Shot by the Taliban*. New York: Little, Brown, 2013. Print.

# Making Space, not Demands: Literacies of Autonomy and Dissensus

Shon Meckfessel Highline College

## KEYWORDS

Occupy, public sphere, dissensus, rhetorical space, civility

I think when it looks like we're winning more, and we're actually making gains in the streets and taking more space, that's gonna draw more people out. Because I've talked to so many people who are just like, they are really hopeless and for good reason, and that that's a reason that they don't come out . . . like if we made anything in the resemblance of [the 2006 teacher's strike and occupation in] Oaxaca, or something, I bet we'd be seeing thousands of people, or at least hundreds more, than we've seen before. Cause it's exciting, and it's new, and a lot of people do feel discontent, and also alienated in this society, and the need to feel inspired, and it's gonna have to look like something new that America never really sees. And it's not gonna be a police baton in the face, because we've all seen that before.

—“Cindy”<sup>1</sup>

## NEOLIBERALISM'S ANTAGONISTIC EXIGENCIES AND THE INADEQUACY OF CIVILITY

**T**he neoliberal era has witnessed fundamental shifts in hegemonic maintenance, imposing a particular set of exigencies upon any who would respond to its offenses. With the US currently incarcerating the highest number of prisoners in the world and indeed in human history, in both proportional and absolute terms, policing, for example, has become a key issue for social justice in the US. As former director of the ACLU's Racial Justice Project Michelle Alexander puts it, rather than merely expressive of economic, housing, and educational inequalities, policing has become a central site for the *production* of inequality. Media consolidation has stifled what was once a central tool of grassroots social change actors: while Daniel Ellsberg met with heroic acclaim on the front pages of *The New York Times*, Julian Assange, Edward Snowden, and Chelsea Manning are forced into hiding, exile, or decades in prison for essentially the same whistleblowing acts; *Time Magazine's* coverage of the My Lai massacre is replaced by embedded reporting of Fallujah. The global nonprofit

sector (Incite!), with an economy the size of a developed nation, appropriates the symbols of social transformation while generally prevented by its funding cycle from adequately carrying through on its promises. Tokenistic political leadership and structures of “indirect rule” (Katz 192) achieve the same effect, as representatives are divorced from their communities. Under such conditions, sociologists Patrick Gillham and John Noakes observe that the neoliberal state works through forcible *incapacitation*—the taking-away of power—of movements, rather than by contesting their claims to *righteousness*, compelling them to respond in turn. Gone are the days when a president would argue for the need to fight for “a society where progress is the servant of our needs” (Johnson); rather, as Loic Wacquant argues, as its provisionary and regulatory aspects fall aside, the neoliberal state presents itself primarily as a face of “hypertrophied penalty,” (42) domestically and globally. Under such conditions, social movement actors find themselves primarily challenged not, as did previous generations, to demonstrate the *justice* of their cause, confronting the state in terms of righteousness; but rather to confront endemic hopelessness by demonstrating the *possibility of agency* in an era which Thatcher famously claimed allows “no alternatives.”

As the global wave of protest beginning in 2011 has manifested a public antagonism unprecedented for decades, economist David Harvie and The Free Association writing collective (Free Association) provide a helpful analysis of the reappearance of antagonism in this clash between movements and the constituted powers they face. Just as capitalism is constituted on an essential antagonism—between labor and capital, between use and exchange value, between the forces of production and the relations of ownership of the means of production—so each historic era of capitalist accumulation develops a regime, with attendant discourses, to manage this antagonism. From the era between the New Deal to Johnson’s New Society, core-industry workers were offered a guaranteed proportion of growth as a reward and incentive for social quiescence. As the domestic market for durable goods became saturated and youth widely rose up against the tedium of such bureaucratic “disciplinary” existence in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new means of continuing was cobbled together in response. Neoliberalism, consequently, came to manage antagonism through deferral, rather than amelioration: shrinking real wages are replaced with easy credit and rocketing debt, cheap commodities manufactured overseas buy personal pleasures at the cost of outsourcing and overseas exploitation, and insecurity is repackaged as mobility, as “Hope” and “Change.” The economic crisis of 2008 marked the very literal end of hope, as investors decidedly refused to have faith in debt salience: the future had arrived. In such a light, the most surprising aspect about the evident antagonism of contemporary social movements is that it took so long to appear.

While the continuing global wave of social unrest has responded to neoliberalism’s antagonistic exigencies in astoundingly innovative and compelling ways, composition scholars and observers alike have generally been reluctant to appreciate the appropriateness of these responses, tenaciously clinging to uncritical conflict-averse frameworks. Composition/Rhetoric has long entertained a deep ambivalence about conflictuality. In “The Rhetoric of the Open Hand and the Rhetoric of the Closed Fist,” Edward Corbett acknowledges the ubiquity of a confrontational “body rhetoric” typifying the protests of the time but bemoans this predominance as a sign of the inarticulate incivility of the era, rather than as a means of persuasion appropriate to its conditions. James Andrews presents the con-

frontational rhetoric during the 1968 occupation of Columbia University as exemplary of what he terms “coercive rhetoric,” eloquent only in restricting the administration’s options, an analysis which ignores the power differences between the student groups and one of the country’s most powerful universities. Wayne Booth (qtd. in Welch, “Informed” 45) in his 1974 introduction to *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* mourns “the inability of most protest groups to get themselves heard,” judging social movements by the standards not of their own rhetorical process but by the standards of enfranchised actors with institutional access. Movements’ irrational preference for conflictuality and performances of antagonism, in Booth’s analysis, are to blame. James Darsey traces this conflict back to a tension in the roots of the Western rhetorical tradition. Contemporary activist rhetoric’s conflictuality descends from the Hebraic tradition of jeremiads and prophecy, in contrast to the Hellenic tradition long dominant in Rhetoric as a field: while the former confronts and disturbs the audience, the latter generally attempts to resonate with its sympathies. As the Vietnam War drew to a close, Richard Ohmann specifically chastised first-year composition for avoiding engaging any “materially rooted conflict of interest” and instead purveying “the ideology of the open society with decisions democratically and rationally made by citizens all of whose arguments have an equal chance of success” (qtd. in Welch, “We’re Here” 225).

Composition’s conflict aversion seems to have changed little since Ohmann’s time. Diana George and Paula Mathieu note that confrontational approaches “def[y] every lesson on audience at least as it is traditionally taught in rhetoric handbooks” (252), including works as recent as Crowley and Hawhee’s *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*. George and Mathieu note that “English-department aesthetics [in the present] generally favor ambiguity over polemics, complexity over clarity” (261). Laura Micciche argues that “compositionists have collectively generated an ethos that sticks to the field, calling to mind, for instance, frequent representations of it as *democratic, inclusive, and friendly*” (3, my emphasis). Although several older works in Composition Studies urge the field to embrace conflictuality (e.g. Lu, “From Silence to Words,” “Conflict and Struggle”; Ellsworth; Pratt; Miller; Trimbur) as inherent in the writing process and classroom, recent studies which acknowledge and critique the field’s tendency towards conflict aversion are notably more sparse (e.g. Welch, “We’re Here,” “Informed”; George and Mathieu; Scott; Welch and Scott).

What is it that might make Composition—particularly in our time—so averse to conflictuality? Ann Larson suggests that this nervousness around conflict may not merely be an innocent bias but instead indicative of unease on behalf of composition’s “managerial unconscious” (Strickland), faced with the all-too-obvious antagonism of labor conditions in which composition is deeply complicit. In Larson’s analysis, Composition’s anxiety about its own professional status, often hastily tied to the sad status of its own beleaguered object—the under-prepared and under-appreciated writer—works to deflect the conversation from its own involvement in atrocious labor practices. Although less antagonistic to conflict when Composition as a field was actually in some sense beleaguered, the success of Composition Studies (in parallel with the graduated collapse in position of Composition’s contingent laborers) has brought it to a pitch: “The problem is not that Compositionists lost that battle against disciplinary discrimination; the problem is that they won it” (Larson). Composition Studies may even display a sort of bad conscious, given that—judged by the standards of its own

making in past studies—scholars should know better.

Nancy Welch notes an additional cause for this rhetorical preference for civility: as incivility becomes associated with the Right, progressive rhetoricians come to view civility itself as inherently politically commendable:

Especially given the toxicity of what passes for public discourse on corporate radio and cable-news broadcasts, the projects of cultivating civility and opening rhetorical space appear interdependent. Hence the rekindled interest among compositionists in civic literacy and public rhetoric along with a pedagogical emphasis on rhetorical listening, balance, and civility. (“Informed”<sup>35</sup>)

Political theorist Jodi Dean points out the risks of this reluctance before conflict, which she holds as presently endemic among progressives and the “academic and typing left”:

As conservatives have resolved to fight any and all opponents to the death and neoliberals have been ever more emboldened in their grotesque grabs for greater and greater shares of the world’s wealth, many on the academic and typing left have urged peace, love, and understanding. These influential voices advocate a turn to ethics, a generosity to difference and awareness of mutual vulnerability. They respond to the religious, nationalist, and market fundamentalisms dominating contemporary social and political life by rejecting dogmatism and conviction, advocating instead micropolitical and ethical practices that work on the self in its immediate reactions and relations. They are likely right that engaging others with affirmation and generosity is a nice thing to do. But it’s politically suicidal. The more the left refrains from divisive political engagement, the more the right advances. (123)

The research I present in the next section bears out Dean’s concern, indicating that under the conditions of the present, it is essential that listening must be balanced with assertive speech or even shouting, vulnerability with commitment, and civility with the courage to break the rules. Indeed, fluency in what gets called “incivility” might well be what is most missing from our students’ rhetorical repertoires, especially those students whose interests are most in conflict with hegemonic orders. In the present situation, what appears as violence at the antagonistic boundary functions to constitute a space apart, an alternative of new subjects, agencies, and ways of living. In seeking to make such spaces, rather than a place within, new social movements have embraced autonomy as a key value, in direct contrast to petitionary pleas for inclusion. In some sense, this autonomy is necessarily defined by two directions of conflict. Antagonism without seeks to set boundaries to the structures of power it seeks to call into question, disrupt, and perhaps even replace; conflictual dissensus within fosters a diffuse deliberation that brings differences into productive conversation without attempting to assimilate or reconcile them. As should be obvious from the continuing wave of global unrest begun in 2011, the violence of making and defending these autonomous spaces is often not metaphorical; however, it would be unfair to typify these as spaces of violence without also acknowledging that they are spaces of hope, of possibility, even of love. In order to better understand the nature of such spaces, I will now turn to the characteristics of recent social movements before finally asking what Composition Studies may learn from them.

## MAKING SPACE FOR POSSIBILITY

While in some sense a trivial assertion, it was only rarely recognized in public discourses that the Occupy movement was, in fact, about occupation. In one statement of solidarity to Occupy authored by participants in Egypt's Tahrir Square, the distinction is made clear:

We are not protesting. Who is there to protest to? What could we ask them for that they could grant? We are occupying. We are reclaiming those same spaces of public practice that have been commodified, privatized and locked into the hands of faceless bureaucracy, real estate portfolios, and police "protection." Hold on to these spaces, nurture them, and let the boundaries of your occupations grow. After all, who built these parks, these plazas, these buildings? Whose labor made them real and livable? Why should it seem so natural that they should be withheld from us, policed and disciplined? Reclaiming these spaces and managing them justly and collectively is proof enough of our legitimacy. ("Solidarity Statement")

The incommensurability of occupation with traditional forms of protest was nowhere so immediately obvious as in the persistent complaint that Occupy lacked "demands." Although the *Occupied Wall Street Journal*, for example, issued an extensive list of demands within weeks, the movement, by any account, was never about its demands. Any given Occupiers would likely voice their own concerns, with more or less overlap with other Occupiers, which was in some sense the point. Additionally, as the Tahrir statement makes clear—"What could we ask them for that they could grant?"—power cannot grant its own alternative. Even requesting this is self-defeating, as Occupy poet Adam Roberts articulates: "demands are directed at authority and help make that authority real / our one demand is instead an offering / join us" (qtd. in Schneider 58). In contesting rather than petitioning power, spaces of autonomy question who it is that makes decisions and how they are made, rather than the content of the decisions themselves. This point was made poetically when, after the loss of the New York camp involving horrific police brutality, Occupiers surrounded police and yelled, "What is your one demand?!" At issue was constituting a new sociality, new subjects, and, in the face of the undeniable antagonism of the hegemonic Other, constituting power. If, under antagonistic conditions, actors were seeking to constitute new possibilities, acting as new subjects that demonstrated possibilities of agency and power in the face of state attempts at incapacitation, then petitioning existent powers in familiar terms for actionable items would have indicated the *end* of the very process participants were attempting to foster. What, then, did they do instead?

While the global wave of contention in 2011 applied the idea of occupation at an unprecedented scale, performing alternative possibilities by "making space" was certainly not a new idea. Latin American movements, such as those in the wake of the 2002 economic collapse in Argentina, had already sought to act by creating a space apart, rather than finding one within, as Marina Sitrin and Dario Azzellini explain:

From the indigenous movements reclaiming territories in Latin America to the neighborhood movements from big cities such as Buenos Aires and Caracas, to new movements in

Europe and the United States taking over the plazas and founding social centers, concrete territory plays a central role in the construction of new social relationships. Even if the examples are very different from one to the other, they can be traced back to a common origin and a common sensibility. (99-100)

Space, as any Occupier could have explained, was not just a metaphor; the magic formula of 2011 relied on very literally “making space” in the squares and centers of cities and towns. But it was what happened in these spaces—the practices and discourses, subjectivities and affects—that gave them such transformative power for participants. It is what people do, how people dwell and bustle in autonomous spaces (as with any spaces) that gives them meaning. As the Tahrir statement movingly says,

In our own occupations of Tahrir, we encountered people entering the Square every day in tears because it was the first time they had walked through those streets and spaces without being harassed by police; it is not just the ideas that are important, these spaces are fundamental to the possibility of a new world. These are public spaces. Spaces for gathering, leisure, meeting, and interacting—these spaces should be the reason we live in cities. Where the state and the interests of owners have made them inaccessible, exclusive or dangerous, it is up to us to make sure that they are safe, inclusive and just. We have and must continue to open them to anyone that wants to build a better world, particularly for the marginalized, excluded and for those groups who have suffered the worst. (“Solidarity Statement”)

As a participant observer in Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Seattle, I was left breathless time and again by the commitment participants showed for these spaces. One day early on in the Occupy Seattle camp, I met a white older middle-aged man named Joe. Our first conversation began with an intimacy impossible between strangers, touching on shared wonder and bewilderment at what we’d found ourselves in the middle of, and offering up without needing to be asked our motives for showing up. Joe, as it turned out, had recently retired after a comfortably middle-class career; he owned his home and had sent his kids to college. When 2008 hit, he quite literally lost it all and was now—without any professed or apparent chemical dependency or psychological problems—living out of local shelters and soup kitchens. As severe as I’d known the effects of the crash to be, I wouldn’t have suspected that situations as stark and sudden as Joe’s were possible. Awkwardly, I told Joe I was sorry to hear what had happened to him. Joe’s response caught me surprised. “It’s okay. No, I mean, I’m happy. I actually prefer it. Otherwise I never would have thought to leave my house and come down here; I wouldn’t have met everybody. It was worth losing everything to be part of this” (“Joe”).

What was it about this space that inspired such unfathomable commitment? At the first glance upon entering the camps, the character of the space was visibly manifest as an intensive and diffuse *participation*; a chaotic rhizomic activity that had no center. Suddenly, physical space facilitated a space of relations where each one of our hidden passions and talents could find expression and alliances, where we could start with who we wanted to be rather than whatever was on offer on the job listing. This wondrous chaos is precisely what proved endlessly frustrating to officials seeking to talk to “the leaders,” or media outlets trying to figure out how to narrate what participants themselves could not. Nathan Schneider describes New York’s Occupy Wall Street in unforgettable terms:

You couldn't keep track of it all, or even start. There was always something new: a water-saving dishwashing system at the kitchen, a bicycle-powered generator, another celebrity visitor, another person shouting nonsense, a dozen new websites, a dozen new posters. The skill and imagination on display—constantly, unpredictably—mounted ever more as an indictment of the alienated world outside that before had kept us from sharing what we could do with one another, that had tricked us into selling our time and talents for money. There was so much. There was too much. There was always, also, a crisis. (80)

Suddenly, the dual nature of work under capitalism was stunningly obvious. Work for all of us, to whatever degree, of course entails selling our time and talents for others' gain, making products and services often useless, or worse, in ways frequently damaging to our bodies, our lives, and our dignities. And yet work is also, persistently, contradictorily meaningful as we find each other in moments of collaboration and sometimes, if accidentally, fulfill the needs and desires of others. Occupy in its better moments was in some amazing sense an opportunity for absolute distinction between the two, the purest space for collaboration and fulfillment without a hint of exploitation. Use value suddenly, absurdly, existed absolutely apart from exchange value. And always, participants only worked on what they *wanted* to work on, although hardly under conditions of their own choosing (hence the "crises" of which Schneider speaks). The chance for non-alienated, meaningful activity—"doing something" in every sense—was, by many accounts, Occupy's most powerful affordance.

The kaleidoscopic activity characteristic of this space was only possible because of a less immediately evident characteristic that allowed these spaces of possibility: the astounding extent to which they were able to withstand and nurture what John Trimbur terms *dissensus*. Particularly in the pseudo-public spaces of most American cities, whose anti-rhetorical nature has been so acutely analyzed by David Fleming, the only apparently possible shared practice is that of shuttling between sites of anonymous individual consumptions. Debate occurs third hand and is generally limited to expressing solidarity with or disavowal from various signifiers of the culture wars. In the emergence of the autonomous spaces of 2011, we learned that such debate is hardly adequate to encompass the political convictions of most members of these yet-to-be-constituted publics; the reintroduction of a material public sphere of tension was transformative for anyone who fell into it. Bound in a sort of situated love by shared rage and histories of frustration, it was this tension in discovery that drove so many of us to stay; we changed through these incessant conversations across difference and learned how thoroughly each of us is a product of our relations. The power of Occupy—what evoked that passionate commitment in action admired even by those who decried their democratic commitments as ineffectual—was precisely the persisting of bodies in space, bodies which, in better moments, came together both in shared hopes and transgression, in clashes of difference and bewilderment. Always before, a dismissive shake of the head, a shared understanding that the Other was beyond the pale, would have sufficed. Now, the persistent presence of the Other, in a way from which one could not turn away, finally—finally! —forced each of us to take responsibility for our ideas and to listen.

While acrimonious disagreement is certainly not novel to American political space, it was the sustained engagement and the co-presence of differences that allowed a painful process of dissensual

development. Schneider observed that this disagreement was “participatory as opposed to partisan” (72); we shared a sort of panic as our categories quickly proved insufficient, but the presence of the Other outlasted the panic. Instead of quickly managing to find those one mostly agrees with, to recreate the filter bubble, the interactions we realized we were all starving for were precisely those across such differences, even across the greatest differences. Who does not at some point rehearse to oneself, with accumulating frustration, a confrontation with a bigoted uncle or a snobbish co-worker? And yet, when we find each other at the family reunion, or the office, we politely stick to talking about marriages or pencil sharpeners. What power there is, Occupy discovered, lies in *not* changing the subject, in searching out the tools to have those impossible conversations, in a context where your own freedom rests on the Other’s presence (since, if our numbers were any smaller, we’d never have been able to get away with it.) For that reason alone, these spaces of transgression fostered a respect for the autonomy of the Other, for their embodied sociality which suddenly seemed so intertwined with our own present and future. Those differences became worth having out, not fleeing from in the multitudes of dismissals, avoidance, and excuse that make up every other moment of our anti-public lives. Occupy was, more than anything else, an uptake of this challenge, of the impossibility of living and deciding together how to live, in America, or in whatever country on Earth.

The conversations found themselves often opening up during the General Assemblies, where hundreds or sometimes thousands would attempt—in an act of absurd but admirable faith—to come to agreement on the multitude of decisions we faced collectively as a movement. Should we approve of the proposal brought by Native Americans to change our name from Occupy to Decolonize in recognition of the genocidal history of the land on which we stand, at the risk of illegibility to wider audiences? Do we consent on a nonviolence agreement before we have any shared notion of the term’s meaning? If the camp is supposed to be a place for everyone, when does behavior merit exclusion? Though painful and ultimately impossible to work out or resolve, conversations on such topics made us think through our collective values and reflect as we never had on our individual ones. Such conversations frequently spilled over into small groups hours after the General Assembly had ended. Habermasian categories of deliberation, free of the “distortions” of emotion and personalism, were far from hand; it was indeed the intensity of affect, a charge through bodies in the circulation of ideas, that proved so compelling. One Seattle interviewee described, in halting phrases revealing the difficulty of narrating such affective deliberation, the subjective transformations people underwent in conversations around policing:

[I]t was really personal, too, and people were crying, talking about their personal accounts. I think that, I have to believe that some of these people that were against, for example were pro-cop or whatnot, had probably not even like thought about police terrorizing immigrant communities, or if they had, they don’t think about it, because it’s not part of their life. And that these sort of personalized experiences, but also the political theory behind it too, for some people, that I don’t think, can’t discount the raw emotional element of it. (“Cindy”)

What those who insisted that Occupy articulate a set of demands to power missed is that such interactions were themselves the stakes for participants; this is why we stood before pepper spray and batons, why we went without sleep and caught cold in our wet socks day after day, why we rushed back to the square after teaching our classes or tending to our ailing parents or being released from

jail. This is what all of us lost, even those who never even knew what they missed.

## FOSTERING LITERACIES OF AUTONOMY AND DISSENSUS IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

The question these movements pose for us as compositionists is, in George and Mathieu's words, "if we choose to teach public writing—as many of us do—just what public writing do we teach? Do we teach the rhetoric of electoral politics, the language of corporate structures, the appeal of non-profits? What about the rhetoric that students are warned against—the bare outrage of radical politics? What is the rhetoric our students need for this time, in this place?" (247). The creation of such autonomous spaces, in our classrooms as in our cities, relies primarily on a willingness and capacity to stand up to conflict at its boundaries, a preparing in enacting the "bare outrage" appropriate to contemporary antagonistic conditions. Welch suggests that precisely by studying the rhetoricity of antagonism, students without easy access to official channels of deliberation might become more familiar with the available means of enacting change, from those places where they already find themselves:

[W]e can bring into view, and into our teaching, the wider field of rhetorical practice and the history of the rhetorical means that have won social change. Through that history we and our students can consider, against the seemingly common-sensical claim that audience unruliness always closes communication channels, those instances where it has taken unruliness to create the conditions . . . within which communication and respect can actually flourish. ("Informed" 46)

Welch elsewhere mirrors Dean's concern, stated above, about the Right's monopoly of disagreeability: "Particularly in a moment when far-right groups have seized upon means to project loudly their arguments, and when the hopes of many for basic reforms . . . are thwarted, we might investigate . . . how effective movements for economic and social justice have played *against* as much as *with* reigning ideas of decorum and civility" ("We're Here" 237). Often, as Welch says, such means of appeal are met with recriminations for the exercise of a universalist, decontextualized *civility*, a topic long central to the dominant Hellenic approach in rhetoric. Drawing on political philosopher James Schmidt, Welch reveals the field-dependent nature of this criticism, which relies both on the positionality of the speaker and the admissibility of the topic: "Although civility can smooth dialogue about contentious issues between people already meeting on a plane of equality and respect," for those excluded from this plane, civility instead represents a "history of enabling 'timid acquiescence' to inequality to masquerade as 'reasonable compromises in the name of the public good'" ("Informed" 36). For those otherwise excluded from deliberation, "civility functions to hold in check agitation against a social order that is undemocratic in access to decision-making voice" (36).

As compositionists, we must scaffold space for practice in facing up to antagonism, a safe space for standing up to unsafety, if we are to prepare students to engage the world as it is, and not merely as we wish it was. The question remains: What would a classroom look like in which students learn to make and hold space in the face of antagonism? However much the field acknowledges the importance of learner-centered participation, how might antagonism and dissensus be drawn on as a means to bring this about? George and Mathieu suggest that by studying antagonistic historical

texts, students can gain a vivid, practiced awareness of how rhetorical approaches “are not universal rules of good writing but rules for writing that operates within certain accepted rhetorical situations. When one seeks to create change, or make something different happen in discourse, the rules might seem to fly out the window” (252). Welch notes that “rhetorical preparation” for conflict “is necessary for groups without official credentials and backing to make arguments that can ‘open up’...as a matter of concern” (“Informed” 35-36) the discussion of topics previously excluded from polite debate. Analytical work such as George and Mathieu suggest would seem indispensable for such preparation.

If students are not only to be analytically prepared for antagonistic rhetoric, but even *practiced* in it, how might the Composition classroom play a role? One model of interest to instructors seeking to scaffold antagonism might be found in Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal’s “Theater of the Oppressed.” In Boal’s model, antagonistic situations are elicited from the audience before the beginning of the play, often from dismaying situations already encountered that the audience members felt powerless to address. The actors then enact in their respective roles the situation, until someone—anyone—in the audience has the courage (it takes some practice) to yell out, “Stop!” The audience applauds the intervener, who steps into the play and takes the place of an actor acting in the disprivileged role. The situation is replayed from before the intervention, and the audience member acts out their notion which might lead to a more equitable resolution of the conflict, with the more practiced actors improvising their likely responses. The facilitator waits until the scene plays out or is stopped again and then facilitates a discussion among the intervening audience-actor and the audience members, allowing the audience to interrogate the actors for their motives. The scene is replayed, with either the same intervener or others, until the audience is satisfied with the resolution. In the composition classroom, the result might not be unlike Welch’s “soapboxing” exercise (*Living Room*), with the additional pausing to explore just those moments most fearful in practice and fertile in rhetorical significance.

The antagonisms that surface through these performances, like the problems of the disprivileged, generally run underground like a dark stream, unacknowledged but with a very real presence. The notion behind Boal’s and the Occupiers’ approaches is that, by facilitating an exceptional space of acknowledgement and practice in theater, in protest, or in our writing assignments and discussions, subjects are transformed by interrupting, precisely in the way so many of us wish we could in daily life, and by working through uncomfortable antagonistic scenarios in a more or less scaffolded manner. By acting as skilled facilitators of antagonism, teachers can work to deconstruct the inequalities reproduced in performance, making space to build literacies of autonomy and dissensus, if we are willing to risk allowing classrooms to be such a space. Such literacies of acknowledging and artfully engaging antagonism have been too long absent from Composition, in the classroom, in our acknowledgement of labor practices, and in our institutional locations.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Occupy interviewees are identified by pseudonyms. The interviews were anonymized following my IRB protocol. Occupy Seattle was being investigated by the FBI when I conducted my interviews and interviewees were anonymized for their protection.

## WORKS CITED

- Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New P, 2012. Print.
- Andrews, James R. "Confrontation at Columbia: A Case Study in Coercive Rhetoric." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 55.1 (1969): 9–16. Print.
- Boal, Augusto. *Theater of the Oppressed*. London: Pluto P, 2000. Print.
- Castoriadis, Cornelius. *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. 1975. Trans. Kathleen Blamey. Cambridge: MIT P, 1998. Print.
- "Cindy." Personal Interview. Summer 2012.
- Corbett, Edward P. J. "The Rhetoric of the Open Hand and the Rhetoric of the Closed Fist." *College Composition and Communication* 20.5 (1969): 288–96. Print.
- Crowley, Sharon, and Debra Hawhee. *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999. Print.
- Darsey, James Francis. *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*. New York: New York UP, 1997. Print.
- Dean, Jodi. *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*. Durham: Duke UP, 2009. Print.
- Ellsworth, Elizabeth. "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy." *Harvard Educational Review* 59.3 (1989): 297–325. Print.
- Fleming, David. *City of Rhetoric: Revitalizing the Public Sphere in Metropolitan America*. Albany: SUNY P, 2008. Print.
- Free Association, The. "Antagonism, Neo-Liberalism and Movements: Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast." *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* 42.4 (2010): 1019–33. Print.
- George, Diana, and Paula Mathieu. "A Place for the Dissident Press in a Rhetorical Education: 'Sending Up a Signal Flare in the Darkness.'" Eds. John M. Ackerman and David J. Coogan. *The Public Work of Rhetoric: Citizen-Scholars and Civic Engagement*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2010. 247–66. Print.
- Gillham, Patrick F., Bob Edwards, and John A. Noakes. "Strategic Incapacitation and the Policing of Occupy Wall Street Protests in New York City, 2011." *Policing and Society* 23.1 (2013): 81–102. Print.
- Gillham, Patrick F., and John A. Noakes. "'More Than A March in a Circle': Transgressive Protests and the Limits of Negotiated Management." *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 12.4 (2007): 341–57. Print.
- Incite! Collective. *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*. Cambridge: South End P, 2009. Print.
- "Joe." Personal Interview. Fall 2011.
- Johnson, Lyndon B. "The Great Society." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 3.4 (1964): 230–232. Print.
- Katz, Michael B. "Why Don't American Cities Burn Very Often?" *Journal of Urban History* 34.2 (2008): 185–208. Print.
- Larson, Ann. "Rhetoric and Composition's Dead." *Education, Class, Politics*, N.p., 22 Feb. 2014. Web. 19 Oct. 2014.
- Lu, Min-Zhan. "Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing?" *College English* 54.8 (1992): 887–913. Print.
- . "From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle." *College English* 49.4 (1987): 437–48. Print.
- Micciche, Laura R. *Doing Emotion: Rhetoric, Writing, Teaching*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2007.

Print.

- Miller, Richard E. "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone." *College English* 56.4 (1994): 389–408. Print.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession* 91 (1991): 33–40. Print.
- Schneider, Nathan. *Thank You, Anarchy: Notes from the Occupy Apocalypse*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2013. Print.
- Scott, Tony. *Dangerous Writing: Understanding and Political Economy of Composition*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2009. Print.
- Sitrin, Marina, and Dario Azzellini. *Occupying Language: The Secret Rendezvous with History and the Present*. Vol. 4. Brooklyn: Zuccotti Park P, 2012. Print.
- "Solidarity Statement from Cairo." *Occupy Wall Street*, 25 Oct. 2011. Web. 19 Oct. 2014.
- Strickland, Donna. *The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2011. Print. Studies in Writing and Rhetoric.
- Trimbur, John. "Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning." *College English* 51.6 (1989): 602–16. Print.
- Wacquant, Loïc J. D. *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2009. Print.
- Welch, Nancy. "Informed, Passionate, and Disorderly: Uncivil Rhetoric in a New Gilded Age." *Community Literacy Journal* 7.1 (2012): 33–51. Print.
- . *Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2008. Print.
- . "'We're Here, and We're Not Going Anywhere': Why Working Class Rhetorical Traditions Still Matter." *College English* 73.3 (2011): 221–42. Print.
- Welch, Nancy, and Tony Scott. *Composition in the Age of Austerity*. Forthcoming. Print.

## EDITORIAL ASSOCIATES

Linda Adler-Kassner  
*University of California, Santa Barbara*

Kara Poe Alexander  
*Baylor University*

Damián Baca  
*University of Arizona*

Kirk Branch  
*Montana State University*

Kevin Browne  
*Syracuse University*

Rebekah Buchanan  
*Western Illinois University*

Gerald Campano  
*University of Pennsylvania*

Michelle Navarre Cleary  
*DePaul University*

Marilyn Cooper  
*Michigan Tech University*

Mary Jane Curry  
*University of Rochester*

Daphne Desser  
*University of Hawaii at Mānoa*

Dylan Dryer  
*University of Maine*

Donna Dunbar-Odom  
*Texas A&M University-Commerce*

Janet Eldred  
*University of Kentucky*

Tom Fox  
*California State University, Chico*

Alanna Frost  
*University of Alabama—Huntsville*

Chris Gallagher  
*Northeastern University*

Susan Garza  
*Texas A&M - Corpus Christi*

Guillaume Gentil  
*Carleton University*

Diana George  
*Virginia Tech*

Mary Goldschmidt  
*University of Scranton*

Juan C. Guerra  
*University of Washington*

Michael Harker  
*Georgia State University*

Asao B. Inoue  
*University of Washington, Tacoma*

Kim Jaxon  
*California State University, Chico*

Zandra Jordan  
*Spelman College*

Rochelle Kapp  
*University of Cape Town*

Tim Laquintano  
*Lafayette College*

Rhea Estelle Lathan  
*Florida State University*

Katie Malcolm  
*University of Washington*

Moriah McCracken  
*St. Edward's University*

Vivette Milson-Whyte  
*The University of the West Indies*

Michael Pennell  
*University of Kentucky*

Rob Petrone  
*Montana State University*

Catherine Prendergast  
*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

Jessica Restaino  
*Montclair State University*

Rebecca Richards  
*St. Olaf College*

Suzanne Kesler Rumsey  
*IUPU-Fort Wayne*

Jennifer Sano-Franchini  
*Virginia Tech*

Donna Scheidt  
*High Point University*

Mary Scott  
*University of London*

Tony Scott  
*Syracuse University*

Mira Shimabukuro  
*Highline Community College*

Christian Smith  
*Coastal Carolina University*

Karin Tusting  
*Lancaster University*

Amy Wan  
*Queens College, University of New York*

Anne Elrod Whitney  
*Pennsylvania State University*

Scott Wible  
*University of Maryland*

Bronwyn T. Williams  
*University of Louisville*