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Engaging Community Literacy through the Rhetorical Work of a Social Movement

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· This essay establishes a context for discussing how community
· literacy pedagogy can benefit from critical engagement with the
· rhetorical actions of a grassroots social movement. Drawing from
· ongoing community literacy work in Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine
· neighborhood, I detail the prospects of speaking truth to power
· in relation to composition studies' ongoing skepticism of rhetorics
· of social protest. I end by arguing that there are central aspects
· associated with oppositional rhetorics that can be encountered in
· community literacy initiatives and used to support forms of social
· change often excluded from conciliatory rhetorics.

“I see the community literacy project as a seed to start recording our history, our efforts, and our perspectives. History leaves us out. If the truth of our experience is never told, then much is lost. Knowledge is power. It’s not everything, but it’s a piece of how we get left out. If the history of Over-the-Rhine only gets written by the dominant forces, then there is a lot of blank pages. We have always said in our effort, a step out of oppression is expression.”

Bonnie Neumeier, Over-the-Rhine People's Movement activist

Neumeier's words above reflect the power of literacy when courageous individuals on the margins of society decide to “speak truth to power.” For Neumeier and others like her, literacy has the potential to call attention to social injustices by enabling people to realize that “a step out of oppression” is indeed expression. And, these peoples' stories of oppression and exclusion are



not without their opposites—liberation and inclusion. The very act of giving expression to lived experiences of hardship and struggle is an act of justice and redemption, one that helps assure that a people’s history no longer goes unheard.

In the best of circumstances, speaking truth to power presents fundamental themes of tragedy and struggle aligned with genuine hope and possibility for the present and future. As antidotes to social injustice, hope and possibility are quite distinct from merely “wishing” or “dreaming.” As Paula Mathieu points out, “To take on hope is to take on risk and responsibility while maintaining a dogged optimism” (17). In the context of a social movement, retaining what might be called a “critical hope” requires mobilizing actions that inspire and motivate while simultaneously calling out instances of social oppression and/or disenfranchisement. Literacy works to connect these actions associated with critical hope—actions expressing both a critique of the status quo and a progressive vision of the future—when communicating that the need for social change is necessary. It is at these moments, when speaking truth to power becomes much more than simply protesting on behalf of “truth” against those in power, that the work of a social movement becomes the work of literacy pedagogy.

The challenge for community literacy practitioners is to align our work with social movements and to use literacy and rhetoric to advance distinct causes. Community literacy practitioners can initiate pedagogical practices embodying critical hope which dramatize the interplay between critique and progressive social action, between social protest and a discourse of possibility. Locating the most opportune times to build strong working relations with social activists is not a straightforward task; the platforms for literacy associated with such a community are bound to differ in significant ways from the comfort many of us, along with our students, identify with the university classroom. Building productive alliances with social activists and the communities they represent is necessary to develop a pedagogical



framework that utilizes a diverse set of literacy practices and to bring people together across radically different social standings and cultural backgrounds. Speaking truth to power requires exposing social injustices and directly calling out those who are responsible and holding them accountable. When considered side-by-side, these dual objectives—using literacy to bring people together to build community across difference while directly calling out others to expose their complicity with social injustices—may seem at odds. How, for instance, are we to reconcile the virtues of respect and reconciliation—the hallmarks of community-building—with a strident, confrontational rhetoric designed to target particular audiences deemed complicit in maintaining an unjust status quo?

This essay argues that community literacy projects can appropriately utilize the progressive rhetoric of community-building across difference, together with the provocative rhetoric often associated with speaking truth to power, when initiated within the context of a social movement committed to social justice. Drawing from rhetorical analyses and community literacy work in support of a local grassroots movement in the Cincinnati neighborhood of Over-the-Rhine, I show how social protest and community building—and by extension radical critique and direct social action—can function together as pedagogical activities that use public discourse to challenge dominant perceptions of inner-city life. In the community activism described throughout this essay, the seemingly contradictory poles of what Edward P.J. Corbett has identified as “the rhetoric of the open hand” and “the rhetoric of the closed-fist” are combined through the pedagogical work of a particular social movement, signaling the power of rhetoric and literacy to advance critical hope. Ultimately, I argue that classroom practices employing the oppositional rhetoric of speaking truth to power have key advantages over the conciliatory rhetoric usually associated with work in community literacy when it comes to engaging our students in social justice work.



In what follows, I establish a context for discussing the rhetoric of the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement, a grassroots movement in Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. I continue to work with this movement in connection with introducing students to the value of speaking truth to power. I then provide a rhetorical investigation into the movement's approach to speaking truth to power in relation to composition studies' ongoing skepticism of rhetorics of social protest. I then turn to community literacy work in Over-the-Rhine that is being done in coordination with People's Movement activities. This work provides an example of how community literacy pedagogy can benefit from critical engagement with the rhetorical actions of a social movement. I end by arguing that there are central aspects associated with oppositional rhetorics that can be encountered in community literacy initiatives and used to support forms of social change often excluded from conciliatory rhetorics.

Community Activism in Action: Rhetoric and the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement

Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine neighborhood is not unlike many inner-city communities across the nation where attempts at community development clash with the reality of economic disenfranchisement and social oppression. According to the Over-the Rhine Community Housing website, "In 1950 approximately 30,000 people resided in Over-Rhine, with whites constituting 99% of that population. Recent data show a population of about 7,600 residents, 80% black. Of the current residents, the median household income for four is less than \$13,000. Of Over-the-Rhine's 7,500 habitable units, 3,000 are below housing code standards. About 300 buildings stand vacant." Over-the-Rhine continues to suffer from many of the typical problems associated with low-income urban environments, "including population decline, homelessness, increased segregation, building abandonment, high rates of unemployment and underemployment, and little access to political power" ("Over-the-Rhine, Our Community").



The professional class has long sought to rehabilitate this urban space, adhering to the belief that developing the area merely requires the free-market and entrepreneurial spirit to take center stage. This movement toward economic rejuvenation is very much underway. As described in an airing of National Public Radio's Weekend Edition Sunday, "The first time you come and drive through Over-the-Rhine, you'll focus on the street corner drug sellers. The second time, you'll notice the Italianate architecture, the bright colors. And then you'll see the coffee shop that sells used books, the art galleries, music clubs" ("Fighting Hunger in Cincinnati").

The neighborhood is currently being gentrified. The threat of further displacement continues, and the future viability of a long-term local grassroots movement to secure the livelihood of low-income residents and workers remains under siege. Over the past forty years, the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement, "a network of organizations based in social service, community education, the arts, welfare rights, and affordable housing development" ("Over-the-Rhine, Our Community"), has consistently addressed issues of racial equity and social justice as well as provided needed services for residents. The success of People's Movement activists over the years is most evident in their historical efforts to stave off economic development plans done at the expense of low-income people.

My ongoing work in Over-the-Rhine follows my deep conviction that recent corporate efforts to transform the neighborhood make it essential that the work of the community organizations affiliated with the People's Movement be supported to enhance equitable redevelopment. The rich history of community activism affiliated with the People's Movement through the years signals the power of literacy to effect change in the community. Even though the powerful have tended to downplay their point of view, these activists understand how their own voices are central to the movement toward community self-determination.



A People's Account of Over-the-Rhine: Then and Now

The history of the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement dates back to the late 1960s and early 1970s when neighborhood activists took it upon themselves to organize and advocate for direct services for an ever-increasing homeless and poverty-stricken population residing in the neighborhood. Very much a product of a time when radical social movements across the globe were flourishing, the People's Movement utilized a rhetoric that framed the conditions of poverty engulfing the neighborhood as local manifestations of broader, global structural injustices. And for these activists, remedying social injustices at the local-level was largely a matter of linking their work to social movements challenging the status quo more broadly. Specifically, arguments revolving around issues such as affordable housing, homelessness, welfare rights, and education in the neighborhood, employed direct appeals to struggles associated with movements advancing anti-imperialist, feminist, anti-war, and pro-labor agendas. A major forum for disseminating People's Movement rhetoric in Over-the-Rhine during the 1970s and the 1980s was *The Voices Over-the-Rhine Community Newspaper*, a neighborhood publication raising awareness of political and civic matters facing residents and workers. A predominant goal for People's Movement activists and *Voices* writers during these early days was to directly connect the hardships of poor residents and workers in Over-the-Rhine to the plight of oppressed groups everywhere. For instance, at times, movement activists and *Voices* writers equated the social forces creating the poverty conditions in Over-the-Rhine with the imperialist practices spawning the forced removal of American Indians onto reservations:

We recognize that Indian people are not alone in the fight to force the rewriting of history. Other "nations" of oppressed people are struggling to expose the truth of how they have been exploited by the American system—Black people, Appalachians, the Vietnamese. And we here in Over-the-Rhine, in our struggle for good living conditions, face some of the same oppressive problems



American Indians face—and face the same small rich class of people who rule this land. Our struggles are the same. ... If we understand the true history of genocide of Indian people, we can better understand the many exploitations of the present American system.” (“American Indian”)

Putting aside the problem of validity in associating gentrification to Indian genocide, the target of protest for these activists was the American system itself and the interests it served. It is clear who they regarded as responsible for its maintenance and legitimization: “In America, where power is held in the hands of a small rich class of people, the present-day news and history is written to support the money interests of that small group; not all the masses of people” (“American Indian”). The workers and residents of Over-the-Rhine are portrayed as casting their lot with the masses of disenfranchised and exploited people, in opposition to the small group of people holding a disproportionate share of wealth, status, and power in American society.

The direct association of Over-the-Rhine with the historical struggles of disenfranchised and exploited people everywhere would find fuller expression in later accounts of the gentrifying process taking place in the neighborhood. In addressing the continuing gentrifying practices leading to the inevitable displacement of low-income people in the neighborhood over the last forty years, it has not become uncommon to characterize an individual working to “revitalize” Over-the-Rhine as the “modern ‘urban pioneer’” who seeks to “wipe out native populations under the new manifest destiny—the promise of a bohemian culture, a vibrant business life, and bustling streets filled with walking consumers” (The Dean of Cincinnati).

Longtime People’s Movement activist and well-established university citizen Thomas A. Dutton has been active in Over-the-Rhine since the early 1980s when, as an architect professor from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, he began working closely with People’s Movement



activists in their efforts to secure low-income housing. Interested in investigating how the built environment and architectural design intersect with the lived experiences of low-income people in urban centers, he was initially impressed with the historical Italianate buildings and their place in the urban landscape of the neighborhood.

In 2002 Dutton founded the Miami University Center for Community Engagement in Over-the-Rhine, a university-community partnership organization with a strong “relationship with the Over-the-Rhine People’s Movement and other important organizations within the inner-city of Cincinnati that struggle for human and racial rights, and social justice” (Miami University). As the Center’s website further notes, “Accordingly, it is a site for learning and for producing knowledge that intersects with the needs and demands of a social movement. The Center privileges human and ecological needs as leading priorities in urban development, and challenges the profit motive as the dominant arbiter in urban social policy.” (Miami University). The flagship initiative of the Center is their Residency Program where “university students, faculty members, and staff collaborate with community organizations and leaders to revitalize the neighborhood through a range of initiatives” (“Campus Compact”). Students in the Residency Program spend an entire semester taking all their courses at the Center and living in Over-the-Rhine. Dutton was recently honored by Campus Compact with the 2009 Thomas Ehrlich Civically Engaged Faculty Award, an annual national award given to a prominent activist teacher-scholar, which recognizes “exemplary leadership in advancing students’ civic learning through public scholarship, commitment to service-learning and civic engagement, and community partnerships” (“Campus Compact”).

Dutton has written extensively on how the gentrification taking place in Over-the-Rhine is emblematic of the larger global effort to control and dispose of entire marginal populations—many of whom reside in inner-city communities—in the name of urban revitalization and economic



development. Fully aware of the stakes involved in calling out dominant portrayals of urban progress for their deliberate whitewashing of the actual social costs of gentrification, Dutton nonetheless holds nothing back in his indictment of those he views as responsible when he writes: “Is it really too extreme to suggest that white society never intended to fully include blacks and other people of color and shows no inclination to bring about such inclusion and equality?” (Dutton Indian Reservations 3). In asserting that history demonstrates the deliberate exclusion of peoples of color from the white narrative of “American progress,” Dutton turns to historian Jeffrey Ostler for an account of how proposed arguments for the assimilation of the American Sioux Indians turned, in practice, into the takeover of their lands and near extermination of Sioux ways of life:

Remarkably, as the Sioux began living on reservations in the late 1870s, many Sioux leaders genuinely thought they might be able to work out a relationship with the United States that would allow them to preserve some of their land and ways of life, while adjusting to new conditions and demands. By the late 1880s, however, as the United States relentlessly cracked down on Sioux ways of life and demanded further cessions of land, these hopes began to seem elusive. (qtd in Dutton Indian Reservations 4)

Drawing further from Ostler’s portrayal of Sioux dispossession and near extermination, Dutton notes that many of the American officials and policymakers at the time were “undoubtedly sincere” in their “belief that assimilation for Indians was possible and desirable.” And yet, the dark, unstated assumption that American Indians were “heathen and savage” worked to ultimately override the idea that they were capable of participating in American civilization as equals (4).

Referencing the contradictory nature of imperialist practices in efforts to assimilate American Indian populations, Dutton points to continuing attempts to revitalize Over-the-Rhine through gentrification: if the



goal is to eradicate the cultural identity and practices affiliated with a marginal social group, what better way to do so than to convince members of that group that if they just follow your lead, they are bound to share in the prosperity you already enjoy. Then, to insure that they inevitably fail to live up to the standards established for inclusion, you banish all traces of their way of life—all reminders of their “inferior” cultural heritage—and with them, all the requisite resources for flourishing in the new environment you have just created for them. The net result is exclusion and displacement, the removal of a people not only from the land they had long occupied, but from that which has forever marked their identity as persons, as human beings living on their own terms.

In terms of speaking truth to power, what is most striking about Dutton’s account of gentrification as essentially an imperialist project is the boldness—the utter lack of timidity—in its charge that there are those who remain directly complicit in the perpetuation of social injustices done at the expense of society’s most vulnerable members. In this account of gentrification, the misery felt by Over-the-Rhine workers and residents calls attention to the suffering experienced by excluded and dispossessed peoples everywhere. “Displacing the poor and arranging their disappearance,” Dutton writes, “is the game plan” (7). For Dutton and other People’s Movement activists, calling out those in power for their deliberate efforts to legitimate fundamentally unjust actions is largely a matter of defending the oppressed from the assaults of the oppressor. Protecting the interests of the poor and the dispossessed is what motivates their outrage directed towards those they deem culpable.

The potential value that social protest holds for activist work in inner-city communities like Over-the-Rhine is something that I try and teach my students. Introducing students to the People’s Movement history of social protest encourages them to explore the grittier side of community activism and take sides on issues of public concern. The fallout of the



neighborhood Uprising of 2001, which brought national attention to the city of Cincinnati during a four-day period in April of that year, is a prime example of the kind of issues facing Over-the-Rhine residents and workers over the last decade. It all began in the aftermath of the police shooting of Timothy Thomas, a 19 year-old black man. Officer Steven Rouch shot Thomas in the back during an on-foot pursuit—several police officers were chasing Thomas because of old traffic violations (“The Trigger”). The incident ignited a storm of protest from the city’s Black community in general, and Over-the-Rhine residents and workers in particular. Subsequent rioting that followed the shooting drew local and national media attention. A Cincinnati Enquirer article sub-heading read: “Violence tears open the city, and it takes a curfew to bring calm. Bodies, property and the city’s reputation are damaged in the worst urban unrest here in 30 years...” (“The Riots Explode”). Buried in news reports from media outlets across the city and nation focusing on the violence, were acknowledgements that peaceful protests were organized over the four-day period of civil unrest. Protests expressed the deep-seated anger and frustration with, among other things, the fact that fifteen African-Americans had been shot to death by city police officers during the preceding six years (“The Trigger”). While looting and property destruction took place in a number of Cincinnati neighborhoods, Over-the-Rhine activists organized peaceful protests that sought to explain why many of the “rioters” felt under-siege by the city establishment. “If you’re fine when things are normal, then you want things to stay normal,” said protest organizer Rev. Damon Lynch III. “If you’re not, then normal is an uncomfortable place to be” (The Trigger”).

Through extended inquiries into the Uprising of 2001 and the peaceful protests, including the subsequent civil unrest and its aftermath (which has both renewed efforts to improve race relations in the city and emboldened efforts to gentrify Over-the-Rhine), students in my Writing for Social Change are encouraged to locate meanings that express something other than the uncritical view that “these people” were



simply “immoral rioters” searching for an excuse to create mass havoc and chaos. Furthermore, students are asked to situate the violent acts of looting and property destruction in relation to the well-organized and peaceful demonstrations calling the city officials and police force into account for their ongoing discriminatory policies and practices against the poor and people of color. In doing so, students complicate ready-made assumptions regarding the nature of organized social protest and the value of using discourse to confront a culpable establishment head-on.

Rather than viewing proclamations of indignation—expressed through such slogans as “Stop Killing Us, or Else!” and “Don’t Shoot!” (“Photo Timeline”)—as the mark of an “uncivil” or “unreasonable” response to an unfortunate situation, students come to question the all-too-easy identification of the direct challenge to authority such slogans clearly represent with any subsequent acts of violence that may eventually be wielded against that authority. Rather than viewing the confrontational rhetorics of social protest on display in the organized streets demonstrations as the cause of much of the violence that was to ensue, students consider if the real culprit might actually be the unjust and oppressive living conditions forced on communities like Over-the-Rhine. Students inquire into the possibility that governmental policies that do little good for the poor, virulent racism, and a capitalist economic system increasingly assure that entire communities in our inner cities are left off the map. In this context, protest placards proclaiming “Cincinnati Cops: Stop Killing Black People!” (“Photo Timeline”) do more than lay blame at the feet of Cincinnati police officers; such discourse positions the police officers as agents of the State who have a responsibility to resist the oppressive and domineering charge to control, and make submissive, black bodies on the streets. Speaking truth to power, students learn, involves articulating a “truth” that those in power may not be comfortable hearing but that nonetheless prioritizes the necessity of expressing indignation directed at an unjust system that perpetuates the indignant conditions many are forced to live under.



Some students decide to speak truth to power directly in their own writings. After an entire semester of regular class meetings in Over-the-Rhine—meeting and interacting with street activists and learning about various People’s Movement activities from the past and present—members of one Writing for Social Change class participated in an Open-Mic gathering at InkTank, a community writing center in the neighborhood. At this monthly event, writers of all stripes share writings with the broader community. Many of the writings address community issues and concerns, inviting audience members to reflect on perceptions of Over-the-Rhine and ongoing struggles taking place in the neighborhood. The writings take many forms, such as poems, short stories, and commentary essays. Some presenters engage in slam poetry and rap. One student from the Writing for Social Change course performed a rap he had written that encouraged the audience members from Over-the-Rhine (OTR) to stand up and take notice of ongoing gentrifying efforts and to organize to confront the establishment. The following is an excerpt from his rap:

OTR, OTR

You really, really ain’t bad as they say you are
Equal rights under the law is all we asking fa’
And if you ain’t gon’ give ‘em to us then we grabbin’ ‘em
We grabbin’ ‘em

Man you know I’m getting kinda mad
They fighting us so we need to start fighting back
All power to the people, they ain’t liking that
But I could really care less ‘cause it’s a righteous act
I’ll bet ya that
And I can tell you that gentrification
Will lead to OTR’s disintegration
So basically what I’m saying
Is that corporatized development’s inherently racist
They’ve got the nerve to call themselves philanthropists



A better word that they could use is cancerous
They're undeterred, they're deceitful, and they're mannerless
The cheddar swirls, greed swallows evenhandedness
So to my people, now's the time to get our mind right
'Cause if we don't, we'll regret it in our hindsight

The performance of these lyrics resonated powerfully with audience members, many of whom had been living and working for years in Over-the-Rhine and were experiencing first-hand the negative effects of gentrification and the prospects of displacement. The fact that a white college student was taking on the role of an Over-the-Rhine resident and activist through this performance did not seem to bother them; in fact, it could be argued that they truly appreciated that someone from outside the neighborhood appeared to “get it.” In rather dramatic fashion, by invoking the People’s Movement ongoing struggle to stop gentrification, this text takes the side of “the oppressed” while encouraging an organized opposition against the “oppressor.”

This student’s text also suggests that, like countless other social justice activists, People’s Movement activists have always been just as concerned with holding themselves responsible for the welfare of their community as they have been critical of those holding them down, standing in the way of their own liberation: “We believe that our struggles here in OTR [Over-the-Rhine] are part of that struggle of people all around this country (and world) for decent living and working conditions and control over their own lives. . . We believe that individual people—in words and actions—must fight against injustice, discrimination, poor living and working conditions (“Why We Print” 13). For People’s Movement activists, calling out the oppressor and motivating the oppressed to work toward self-determination are akin to identifying the warden while moving the prisoner to unchain himself.



Speaking Truth to Power: Hands, Fists, and Social Protest

The approach to speaking truth to power described above suggests a distinct conception of political rhetoric. As an expression of political rhetoric, being competent in naming the oppressor and systems of oppression is not all that is required for People's Movement activists to effectively call into question unjust actions. Rather, what is needed is a rhetorical framework to critically interrogate the unjust activities enacted by those who wield power over the oppressed and to hold them accountable. At the same time, the oppressed must use discourse to challenge each other to "unchain themselves," and in so doing, build community for the purpose of coming together for self-determination.

In proclaiming who and what are actively working against the interests of the poor in Over-the-Rhine, People's Movement activists complete only one half of the equation necessary to speak truth to power. The other half entails convincing others that their critique, or protest, is worth engaging. However, the rhetoric deployed by the People's Movement must contend with a number of obstacles, the most obvious being the tendency to be labeled by audiences as "extremist" or "coercive." In this sense, the People's Movement shares much in common with the rhetorical legacy of American radicalism. According to James Darsey, American radicalism is best exemplified by "its concern with the political roots of a society, its fundamental laws, its foundational principles, its most sacred covenants" (9). Subsequently, its rhetoric might be characterized as "a steadfast refusal to adapt itself to the perspectives of its audience," and as a result, be perceived by the majority as "uncivil" or "extremist" (5-6). The backdrop for establishing what might come to be stigmatized as an incendiary rhetoric is the promotion of its opposite: a civil, conciliatory rhetoric. Nonetheless, the form and content of a "civil discourse" is wholly dependent on the rhetorical situation from which it derives. In the case of the People's Movement's employment of social protest, it is useful to examine the form of "civility" it is in response to.



In “Corbett’s Hand: A Rhetorical Figure for Composition Studies,” Richard Marback examines composition studies’ continuing disavowal of confrontational rhetorics in favor of the humanist rhetorics associated with our professional discourses, which are portrayed as conciliatory, civil, and effectively reasoned. Turning to Edward P.J. Corbett’s 1969 article, “The Rhetoric of the Closed Fist and the Rhetoric of the Open Hand,” Marback traces composition’s inability to effectively engage the public on issues of justice to the field’s response to the turmoil of the late 1960s, when numerous protest movements centering on issues of race, class, and gender were ultimately positioned as “coercive” by the broader culture. Drawing from the classical rhetorical figure of the “open hand and the closed fist,” composition studies constructed “the humanizing, liberating potential of the writing hand in opposition to the externally and physically enforced violence of the closed fist” (189). Corbett argued that composition studies needed to side with the “reasoned, sustained, conciliatory discussion of the issues” of the open hand, in contrast to the “non-rational, non-sequential, often nonverbal, frequently provocative means [of persuasion]” of the closed fist “prevalent in the late 1960’s” (qtd. in Marback 181). According to Marback, however, the uncivil attributes ascribed to social protest concealed the actual violent and coercive dynamics of certain rhetorics marked as “civil” or “progressive.” It is this privileging of a civil discourse, in opposition to the “unseemly” confrontational discourse of social protest, that composition studies has inherited.

While the People’s Movement clearly operates in a different context from composition studies, its positioning as a movement on the margins of the broader culture suggests that much of its work remains a response to dominant rhetorical modes and styles. In the case of composition studies in the late 1960s, the rhetoric on society’s margins that presented the biggest challenge to the field’s conception of itself as promoting the democratic ideal of the open hand was the closed-fist rhetoric associated with Black Power. Through the discourse of civility



marked by the open hand, stood its opposite—the Black Power fist, made emblematic of the exact kind of discourse that was understood to be an anathema to a democratic polity. “From the perspective of liberal democracy,” Marback writes, “the image of the conciliatory open hand gives expression to the most significant opportunities for discursive mediations of civic life, while the closed-fisted refusal to engage in a discussion in these terms signals all that is opposed to democratic values and civic participation” (182). On the other hand, “In a society where racial identity correlates with power and privilege, the Black Power fist gives expression not only to belligerence, but to the feelings of anger and frustration with systemic indifference to discrimination and segregation” (184).

In the same way that the anger at the white establishment and the moral indignation expressed through the clenching of fists stood as a justified response to racial oppression and discrimination, the People’s Movement’s targeting of Over-the-Rhine “urban pioneers” as “colonial rulers” (See Dutton “Colony Over-the-Rhine”) signals an appropriate response to the real-world violence of gentrification. As an Over-the-Rhine developer recently put it in describing his great fortune to expand and develop his area of operations to revitalize the neighborhood, “We’re having a lot of success. This area is like a low-hanging fruit” (“Private Firm Renovates”). The People’s Movement use of social protest is a response to precisely this kind of “open hand” rhetoric, which in actuality operates as a coercive, imperialist project disguised in the cloak of “civility” and “conciliation.”

As Marback demonstrates, the rhetoric of civility embedded in the image of the open hand has provided composition studies with an idealized version of writing to intervene in public affairs to challenge social injustices, and contribute to social change. Insofar as the “open hand” pits the expression of a privileged group in opposition to an “unreasonable” and “coercive” closed-fist rhetoric, teachers can imagine students getting training in a privileged discourse that will



give them access to public audiences. However, when communicating effectively means using a discourse to “move out of the realm of the disenfranchised into the realm of privilege” (191), 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. The capacity of teachers and students, then, to use public discourse in ways that matter is severely contained because the mere expression of critical insights purporting to challenge the system is understood as equal to actually changing the system.

Unlike this idealized image of an open hand, for those speaking truth to power it is precisely the discursive exchanges and material conditions determining the everyday lives and concerns of the socially disenfranchised that mark the terms of engagement with systems of privilege and oppression. Rather than using rhetoric to fashion a critical-distancing from issues as a way to direct social change from above, speaking truth to power confronts power head on to critically engage directly with issues, and in so doing, upends the figure of the open hand raised up and the closed fist clenching. Turned downward, the open hand is now envisioned as moving down grasping, engulfing, and smothering everything within its reach; while the closed fist rises up from the ground, and asserts itself, disrupting attempts made by the open hand to hold it down. In this sense, the closed fist rhetoric of the People’s Movement finds ways to disrupt the established symbolic order so as to call attention to a new social order, one that re-thinks everyday perceptions of inner-city life.

It is exactly at this point of discursive disruption where we can theorize that the operation of the hand and fist ultimately becomes paradoxical: the disruptive movement of the closed fist pushing upward becomes enmeshed in the open hand, but rather than smothering the closed fist, the open hand now works to embrace it. Combining fist with hand, the



new figure links the power of critical assertion with the receptiveness of listening—the capacity of the fist to assert itself becomes an act of self-determination which is nevertheless dependent on the good will of the embracing hand to give full recognition to the capacity of oppressed peoples to express their own self-worth and dignity on their own terms.

Fists and Hands as Gifts and the Work of Critical Hope

The figure of the closed fist critically asserting and the open hand embracing finds expression in a guest column by Thomas A. Dutton appearing in the Cincinnati Enquirer entitled “The Gift of the Drop Inn Center.” This piece deals with the ongoing controversy in Over-the-Rhine involving the Drop Inn Center, a homeless shelter that stands as a founding member organization of the People’s Movement. The debate centers on how the Drop Inn Center, the region’s largest homeless shelter, should fit into plans to revitalize the neighborhood. The Drop Inn Center has been in its present location in Over-the-Rhine for over thirty years, and powerful interests have long sought to relocate the shelter outside of the neighborhood to make room for upscale economic development. Much more than a homeless shelter, the Drop Inn Center has consistently addressed issues of racial equity and social justice as well as provided needed services for residents. Furthermore, the organization has always worked to document and promote a fuller understanding of the struggles and hopes of low-income folks.

In this guest column, Dutton addresses the tendency to portray the Drop Inn Center as a hindrance to community renewal. Shifting gears away from directly comparing gentrification in Over-the-Rhine to the colonial project of dislocating American Indians, Dutton now pushes the fist upward toward the hand collapsing by taking issue with those who suggest that the Drop Inn Center attracts an “undesirable” population and arguing that the homeless shelter actually epitomizes the empathy required to “restore a person’s humanity.” In a direct indictment of those who would suggest that the Drop Inn Center should move out of Over-the-Rhine, Dutton asserts that the homeless shelter



is “a place of compassion, a place of redemption in peoples’ struggle to overcome addiction to drugs and alcohol, a healing place. And it is out of this base of interpersonal dynamics that we can see the contribution of the wider political mission of the Drop Inn Center and the Over-the-Rhine People’s Movement: to restore Cincinnati’s humanity”. The kind of empathy Dutton has in mind challenges us all to make connections between the hardships of inner-city living and the relative wealth of many middle-class suburbs—the struggle to make ends meet and the comfort that comes with securing a roof over one’s head. For Dutton and the People’s Movement, as long as Greater Cincinnati fails to substantively cultivate this sense of civic awareness amongst its citizens, segregation across racial and class lines is certain to continue. As long as the voices of the powerful predominate over the voices of socially and economically disenfranchised citizens, social injustices will remain a reality in the region.

In the final analysis, Dutton challenges his readers to perceive the homeless as “gifts”—inviting fellow citizens to revitalize their own capacities to show deep compassion through civic engagement. In doing so, his words disrupt established hierarchies between hands and fists “where homeless folks are typically not seen, indeed, they are scorned, reviled, denounced [and] rejected.” In their place he puts the fists enmeshed with hands as “gifts”—the source of empathy deriving from assertions of dignity spawned initially under conditions of extreme hardship and pain.

The linking of fists with hands also testifies to the capacity of speaking truth to power and calls attention both to the political importance of directly engaging extreme duress not of one’s own choosing, and to the possibility of remaining hopeful as one works toward a more just society nonetheless. Identifying with suffering one did not cause while remaining hopeful is a dual impulse best summarized by Cornel West in his articulation of prophetic pragmatism, a philosophical account of progressive political activism:



Prophetic pragmatism, as a form of third-wave left romanticism, tempers its utopian impulse with a profound sense of the tragic character of life and history. This sense of the tragic highlights the irreducible predicament of unique individuals who undergo dread, despair, disillusionment, disease, and death and the institutional forms of oppression that dehumanize people. Tragic thought is not confined solely to the plight of the individual; it also applies to social experiences of resistance, revolution, and societal reconstruction. Prophetic pragmatism is a form of tragic thought in that it confronts candidly individual and collective experiences of evil in individuals and institutions—with little expectation of ridding the world of all evil. Yet it is a kind of romanticism in that it holds many experiences of evil to be neither inevitable nor necessary but rather the results of human agency, i.e., choices and actions. (228)

West's explanation of prophetic pragmatism describes tragedy in terms of the individual and social experiences of suffering that are ultimately attributable to the consequences of living in an unjust society. Confronting and coming to terms with this sense of the tragic in modern society requires identifying with human suffering and working for social change despite the recognition that such efforts will yield imperfect results. At the same time, the utopian impulse of prophetic pragmatism holds that because many experiences of suffering and social oppression are not “natural” and are the consequences of human intent and actions, there are substantive opportunities for articulating a politics of possibility, inspiring people to be hopeful in working for radical social reform and transformation.

West's description of suffering within a utopian impulse is a variation on the theme of critical assertion and receptiveness epitomized in my account of the revised figure of fists and hands. For prophetic pragmatists, this dynamic of critically asserting oneself while depending on the good will of others to join in the struggles to



transform the status quo is cast as the limitations and possibilities of progressive political action. The tragic understanding of modern society calls for critical attention to the limitations of progressive political action, or the “human impossibility of paradise,” yet also impels individuals to work for social change by making critical assertions out of “moral outrage and human desperation in the face of prevailing forms of evil in human societies and lives” (229). At the same time, the utopian impulse of prophetic pragmatism highlights the possibilities of inspiring people to join in the struggle to work for social change and to remain hopeful regarding progressive political struggle by virtue of the fact that social “evils” are often the result of collective human action, and are thus transformable. The interaction between fist and hand—between critical assertions regarding the status quo and the hopeful response that works to build community across difference—creates the conditions necessary for enacting critical hope in the People’s Movement’s ongoing efforts to speak truth to power.

Implications for Community Literacy Pedagogy

Speaking truth to power has significant pedagogical implications for the prospects of initiating community literacy projects in tandem with the work of a social movement. Before describing my community literacy work in alliance with the Over-the-Rhine People’s Movement, it is helpful to clarify the role of community literacy pedagogy as a form of action sustained by the work of a social movement that supports the kind of rhetorical dynamics outlined in the previous section. When it comes to creating a pedagogical framework, my account of speaking truth to power suggests that simply mobilizing critical resistance on the part of students as a solution to the problem of community disempowerment disengages the work of community literacy projects away from local communities. Simply having students provide academic critiques as a literate strategy for countering social injustices in a local inner-city neighborhood like Over-the-Rhine has consequences not unlike what may happen in a writing classroom on a university campus if the discourse used remains largely disengaged



from the real-life rhetorical situations of the everyday lives of people residing in that community. While emphasizing that the solution to social injustices is actualized in students' use of literacy to identify—and perhaps theoretically challenge—the work of hegemony, all too often community literacy pedagogy fails to consider ways in which literacy might be used as an activity for combating social injustices keeping the status quo in place.

This opposition between critical insight and structural change marks the gulf between engagement and rhetorical action in community literacy projects that simply ask students to write critically about the social injustices they observe in the community. For community literacy projects to work toward structural solutions to systemic problems, they need to take into account the necessity of using writing as a tool for collectively critically engaging. For community literacy projects to fulfill their promise of social change, proposing solutions is not enough. Implying that when individuals simply identify the work of hegemony this automatically satisfies the conditions for acting more justly in the world draws attention away from structural solutions. The stark divide between critical insight and social action inherited from the broader discipline of composition studies helps explain why community literacy practitioners interested in social change often find it so difficult to provide an institutional framework for effectively challenging the status quo in the local communities in which they work. Whenever community literacy pedagogy solicits individual students to articulate critical insights at the expense of genuine social reform in partnership with local grassroots movements for change, the possibility of instituting actions that work for social justice is greatly compromised.

Positioning community literacy pedagogy within the context of a movement for social change requires finding ways for literacy education to provide opportunities for learning what is at stake in activist work. This pedagogy brings students and teachers into dialogue with community members and activists to critically engage issues



and to disrupt established hierarchies across systems of privilege and oppression. In the process, community building across difference is initiated by providing material space for critical assertions that challenge structural injustices. In this sense, speaking truth to power operates as a literacy practice that provides opportunities for enacting critical hope by grounding writing in the material conditions giving rise to the most pressing issues facing a community while bearing witness to the possibility of enacting genuine transformation in the service of social justice. Going beyond merely identifying and critiquing social injustices, inviting students to work with community members and activists to use writing critically to speak truth to power can be a genuine act of civic engagement.

Community Literacy Work with the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement

My involvement with community literacy work in Over-the-Rhine began when I first made contact with a few People's Movement activists and heard them express a strong desire to document and publicize the long history of community activism in Over-the-Rhine. I had already engaged in a number of social justice related activities in the neighborhood during the previous four years and was viewed as a credible partner because I had earned, as a People's Movement activist once told me, the required "community credits." Furthermore, I had already internalized much of the vocabulary and ideological dispositions of the People's Movement. This ability to "talk the talk" of the movement gave us a shared language for discussing issues that mattered and provided me with an entry point for learning more deeply about the people, including their struggles, hopes, and fears.

I eventually established a working relationship with Thomas A. Dutton at the Miami University Center for Community Engagement in Over-the-Rhine. I teach my Writing for Social Change course at the Center. Students in this class meet regularly at the Center and interact with Over-the-Rhine community residents and activists as a way



of examining how an actual social movement and everyday people use rhetoric and writing to work for social change. Significantly, the university where I teach—largely a commuter campus with many first generation college students—is in the suburbs across the river from Cincinnati. My students are very familiar with “how Over-the-Rhine, within the cultural imagination of the entire Cincinnati region, has become so symbolic of all the negative images and things that are supposedly wrong with the city: crime, blight, dirtiness, general poverty, etc. . .” (Wilkey qtd. in Dreese et al). Most of my students come from suburban environments and many claim “to know” Over-the-Rhine, although their familiarity with the neighborhood often comes “from watching the crime reports on the 11 o’clock news.” It is not a stretch to say that many students are often “afraid to visit the neighborhood” (Wilkey qtd. in Dreese et al).

As an example of community literacy emphasizing public writing, this Writing for Social Change course culminates in an “Over-the-Rhine Campaign Project” in partnership with People’s Movement activists. Over the course of the semester, students are introduced to ongoing activist campaigns in Over-the-Rhine to assist low-income individuals and the homeless. Students have numerous face-to-face interactions with community activists and take on many critical investigations into media and community texts dealing with Over-the-Rhine. Students also have substantial opportunities to participate in the formation of actual campaign projects through interactions with these community activists. The components of a given campaign can take many forms, including: designing and producing a “street newsletter” or “zine,” creating a Display Board based on oral history interviews of Over-the-Rhine residents and workers, and working with Over-the-Rhine residents and workers on their writing. The basic requirement is that the project be done in consultation with our community partners.

As part of their Over-the-Rhine Campaign Project, a recent class of students designed and produced a ‘zine entitled *The People’s Friend*, in



recognition of their support of the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement. One of the students, Dana Divine, had the opportunity to read a poem that he wrote which was published in this 'zine at an Open Mic gathering at InkTank, the previously mentioned community writing center in Over-the-Rhine. Writers and poets from the Men's Recovery Program at the Drop Inn Center homeless shelter direct this event. I facilitate a weekly writing group at the Drop Inn Center with these men, who use writing as a tool for recovery from drug and alcohol abuse. Central to my pedagogical approach in facilitating this writing group is to make connections with the broader social issues in Over-the-Rhine as a way of strengthening their work through the recovery progress.

The poem Divine wrote for the 'zine and Open Mic is entitled "Gentrification—a.k.a. Get the Fuck Out!". During one of my meetings with the Drop Inn Center writing group, I passed out my students' 'zine to the men. I asked them to write in response to the pieces in the 'zine. One of the men, "The Mad Poet," wrote a poem in direct response to Dana's poem. The Mad Poet's poem, entitled "Serfication—a.k.a. I am One With the Land," completes a textual interaction that demonstrates the capacity that speaking truth to power has in using social protest to build community across difference. Below, I present both poems in their entirety:

Gentrification—a.k.a. Get the Fuck Out!

by Dana Divine

Out with the tired, old, poor,
we want something easy on the eyes.
How about a nice café,
Maybe some upscale clothing shops.
The people need better living conditions,
I'm for some new condos (market rate of course!)
Why don't these people get their shit together,



Pull themselves up from their bootstraps?
Turn that frown upside down,
make those lemons into lemonade.
Try getting a goddamn job,
make a contribution to society.

This community is growing, expanding,
we're trying to rebuild and reinvent.
We don't want to kick people to the curb,
maybe they can just scoot out of the way.
Let's not allow anyone to slow us down,
change must be painless and quick.

This world is forever changing,
Only the strongest can keep up,
it's a Darwinian thing,
the survival of the richest.
There is no progress without casualties,
it's the American way by God!

Serfication—a.k.a. I am One With the Land
By The Mad Poet

I am tired, old, and poor,
I line up twice in soup kitchens for more.
Can you see that I am down but not out,
Why must I get the fuck out?

I am one with the land,
You must seriously reconsider your plan.
Please grant me more time to pay,
I am currently learning the right way.



By simply taking it day by day,
I know what they say.
I am society's so-called ill,
Lost my job, can't pay the bills.

No matter what the sun always shines,
Today I opposed a sip of wine.
Instead I drank cold lemonade,
Things not perfect, but soon I'll have it made.
My pain is sometimes un-bearing,
Upscale society is so uncaring.
A smile gets me through the pain,
I do this even in the rain.

The community is growing and expanding,
I am taking vocational classes through understanding.
The poor cannot compete with the riches,
Does Darwin's theory mean I must sleep in ditches?

Is your community redevelopment approved by God,
Or should I march and scream a Christian Jihad?
Unnecessary causalities is so unkind,
What happened to no man left behind?

Can you see that I am down but not out,
Why must I get the fuck out?
I am one with the land,
You must seriously reconsider your plan.

Speaking in the voice of the Over-the-Rhine market-rate developer,
Divine uses sarcasm to highlight the dangers unfettered market-rate
development holds for low-income individuals in communities like
Over-the-Rhine. A culmination of what he learned through his critical



inquiries into the rhetoric surrounding the historical and contemporary struggles in Over-the-Rhine, the poem reaches back against systems of privilege and oppression to make space for an alternative perspective to be heard. In the process, the poem invites an encounter with difference as an opportunity to learn more about the lived experiences of the “other.” The Mad Poet accepts Divine’s invitation by speaking in his own voice and on his own terms, proclaiming boldly the true impact that gentrification has on the lives of the most vulnerable in society. Taken together, both poems illustrate how speaking truth to power calls direct attention to unjust political arrangements and holds the oppressor accountable—all the while providing the material conditions necessary for encouraging community ties across difference.

Conclusion

Much of the recent scholarship in community literacy centers on finding ways to use literacy to bring students together with community partners for the purpose of transforming relations between self and other across sites of radical difference in ways that are both ethical and just (see Flower; Long). Linda Flower justifies engaging students in this kind of community-building work by contrasting it with a critical discourse that encourages students to “speak against something—against the media and ideology, against their own assumptions and inclinations as well as against institutions, oppression, and power” (78). For Flower, while critical approaches to composition clearly help students become aware of issues of oppression and domination and marginalized “others” in society, they do not make readily available the kind of literacy tools necessary for involving students in the “difficult art of dialogue” that is necessary for participation in “the culturally diverse public forums that materialize in dorm rooms, fraternity meetings, or professional courses and later in policy-drafting sessions at the office and decisions at the PTA” (79). Flower further clarifies her preference for teaching community literacy as civic dialogue when she asks:



Where do we learn how to speak with others? How could we develop an intercultural rhetoric that supports dialogue, deliberation, and collaborative action across differences? Our current paradigms . . . prepare us well to speak against forces that diminish and oppress, to deconstruct, critique, and resist. They let us stand without compromise, outside and above. But they often fail us when we face the much more difficult practice of speaking for something—in ways that actually make a difference. (79 italics in original)

The terms established for civic dialogue posed above are set in direct opposition to the rhetoric of social protest I have outlined in this essay. I have argued that as a tool for speaking truth to power, critical approaches to social protest can actually transform relations across systems of oppression and privilege and thus open up opportunities for building community across difference. In the process, I have attempted to show how an oppositional rhetoric might be utilized to directly engage social injustices, and in doing so, hold accountable those who are perpetuating an unjust status quo. Instead of asking, “How do we teach the rhetorical art of ongoing inquiry versus position taking (even when that position is inspired by a liberatory ideology)?” (Flower 79), I would have us ask, How do we work with students to show that position taking is essential and that the “art of ongoing inquiry” is not limited to the conciliatory acts of a “civic dialogue”? How do we teach that the oppositional rhetoric of speaking truth to power is an important dimension of many effective organized efforts to collectively inquire into social injustices and confront directly head-on those entities responsible for maintaining unjust political and economic arrangements? How, in other words, do we confront a conciliatory rhetoric that would have us believe that building a community of individuals to organize and express outrage directed at an establishment that clearly perpetuates social injustices is at best rather impotent and at worse reactionary, even violent?



In her recent book *Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World*, Nancy Welch makes a strong case for the value of inviting students to consider how activist rhetorics that are oppositional might be employed in their own writings. In doing so, Welch turns to what activist writer Arundhati Roy has termed a “rhetoric from below,” which stems “not from official policy makers but from and to those who feel the daily effects of official policy” (71). In presenting to students a series of activist confrontations with official policy makers, governmental entities, corporate bosses, and university officials, Welch highlights how the creation and use of slogans such as “Money for the classroom/Not for the boardroom” and “Part-Time America Doesn’t Work!” are examples of “the art of practical discourse . . . the search for the available means to move a recalcitrant boss, to deter a bellicose presidential administration” (72). Bringing such texts to class can demonstrate to students “the motivation for mass resistance by people who are bound together in, and potentially against, the same ‘race to the bottom’. Solidarity rhetoric has in these moments a material, not only a moral, basis” (15). I would add that instances of such organized mass resistance also counteract a common debilitating effect of conciliatory rhetoric, namely, its tendency to downplay the extent to which a “just anger,” at times, might very well be a legitimate rhetorical grounding for campaign organizing. Furthermore, the fact that such organized attempts to use discourse to directly oppose a targeted establishment has at times been proven necessary to enact social change stands in stark contrast to the taken-for-granted notion that simply inquiring into injustices with others through civic dialogue leads to just actions.

Community literacy projects such as the one I have outlined in this essay offer one way for students to learn the links between writing and social change through direct engagement with an actual social movement on the ground. Students in my Writing for Social Change course become first-hand witnesses to oppression, as they come to experience—both dramatically and vividly—ordinary people organizing efforts to fight social injustices. Through practices of both



collective inquiry and collective position taking, students learn that sometimes placing demands for change on established audiences is the only alternative available for people who have been historically marginalized and disenfranchised.

As community literacy practitioners, aligning our work with social movements committed to progressive social change can introduce us, along with our students, to rhetorical strategies that have the potential of transforming community relations. At the same time, oppositional rhetorical strategies that speak truth to power have the potential of disrupting power relations in the context of community-building while also calling attention to the legitimacy of critical assertions and receptive listening in the more general, global debates involving issues of social justice. While creating an atmosphere of productive discursive engagement across racial, class, and gender lines may prove extremely challenging in public spheres where dominant voices effectively work to silence those on the margins, engaging grassroots social movement activities on the ground is more likely to provide substantive opportunities for discursive exchanges that challenge dominant conceptions of the lives of the socially disenfranchised and dispossessed. As an invitation to encounter people's organized efforts to challenge social injustices, engaging community literacy through the rhetorical work of a social movement holds the promise of encouraging us, along with our students, to experience writing and rhetoric as tools for genuine social change.



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