

## Community-Based Critique: No Walk in the Park

Caroline Gottschalk-Druschke, Nadya Pittendrigh, and

Diane Chin, University of Illinois at Chicago

This article examines a community-based writing assignment that invited first-year students to intervene in controversies surrounding Chicago's Millennium Park. Despite the apparent diversity of student arguments, a single ideology permeated all student texts. Whether self-identifying as liberal or conservative, students deployed almost identical rhetoric to assert that the park either embodied or failed to embody "democratic values." We learned that, however threatening it may be to our own ideological investments, we must push students to interrogate their foundational assumptions. Given current orthodoxy about the morality of any action or idea labeled "democratic," it is important that teachers work to stimulate true diversity of opinion by challenging "democracy" as a trump argument.

### Golden Chances and Sacred Cows

This essay tells the story of a community-based writing project that taught the teachers a lesson. Although students in a first-year writing class authored trenchant critiques of Chicago's impressively slick Millennium Park, an important teaching opportunity slipped away. Looking back, we regret the loss of a golden chance to guide students through a critique of their own rock-bottom, foundational assumptions—assumptions, in this case, located in the rhetoric of liberal democracy. We see, now, that the chance was missed because our own immersion in the same liberal orthodoxy obscured the big picture: we were slow to realize that almost every student, regardless of orientation to the city's grand Millennium Park enterprise, pegged his or her argument on the very same, bred-in-the-bone, unquestioned beliefs. This essay is a cautionary tale meant to encourage writing teachers to push harder and dig deeper in an effort to help students develop into citizen-scholars who question all sacred cows, even our own.

The most sacred of all cows for teachers like us may be a faith in the possibility of societal change. We would not be surprised if a sizable proportion of the nation's post-secondary writing instructors find reward and encouragement, as we do, in believing that their generally anonymous and poorly compensated work "makes a difference" by impelling civilization toward what they (and we) perhaps sometimes unreflectively perceive as greater "social justice." We want our students to learn that writing and rhetoric—potent social skills available at no charge to any individual who takes them up—are useful for tasks more significant than crafting clever wedding toasts. We want students to understand writing and rhetoric as searchlights that can expose what is often hidden in plain sight: society's power relations and inequalities. We want to share with undergraduates at least some of the ability we've gained to challenge orthodoxy and develop critical insights into the rhetoric of liberal democracy. Like many writing teachers who practice "classroom activism," we largely agree with Bruce Herzberg's pronouncement of more than a decade ago:

The effort to reach into the composition class with a curriculum aimed at democracy and social justice is an attempt to make schools function...as radically democratic institutions, with the goal not only of making individual students more successful, but also of making better citizens....These efforts belong in the composition class because of the rhetorical as well as the practical nature of citizenship and social transformation. (317)

Ever hopeful, we emphasize "social transformation." Instructors at secular public universities may be more reluctant than colleagues at private, faith-based institutions to discuss the relationship between higher education and personal and social transformation, but many would agree with the President Emeritus of Georgetown University who writes about his university's students: "To be educated...means to take the store of knowledge that they gain as undergraduates...and use it to assume their place as leaders capable of bringing about change in a world longing for justice, compassion, and peace" (O'Donovan 133).

Community-based learning gives writing teachers many options for exemplifying critical composition theory's recognition that rhetoric is "always already ideological" (Berlin 679), a recognition that fuels critical theory's thrust toward a more just society. This is particularly true when, in a community-based course, "a 'do good' sense of responsiveness to immediate needs is replaced by an analysis of power and oppression" (Boyle-Baise and Langford 55). Critical theory is put into practice, and that practice

is shared with our students, each time we present the community as a text, inviting students to “read” the social structures and relationships encoded in a ride on an inner city subway, a month’s work as a tutor in a public school, or a visit to a public park. A walk in the park, as it happens, was the experience that generated the student writing examined in this article.

### **Our Kind of Town**

Our campus, situated in the heart of one of the nation’s greatest urban centers on the Near West Side of Chicago, provides a very “natural” ground for community-based writing. Immediately to the east stands the Oz-like splendor of Chicago’s famous skyline; to the west and south stretch miles of neighborhoods where families struggle with failing public schools, joblessness, insufficient health care, crime, and a crumbling built environment. The University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) opened in 1965, in a memorable era of rapid-fire challenges to social and political institutions. Three years later, only blocks away, already on-the-brink neighborhoods were burned to the ground by their own residents in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

From the outset, UIC has capitalized on its environment by emphasizing urban studies, formalized in 1993 in the “Great Cities Commitment.” This campus-wide commitment summons faculty and students to engage with the community in a quest for new knowledge focused on mitigating or solving urban problems. Great Cities is consistent with UIC’s character as one of the nation’s many major research universities that satisfy the “service” aspect of their missions primarily by creating socially useful new knowledge (Stanton, Giles, and Cruz 15). Until recently, this kind of knowledge-making was reserved primarily for faculty and graduate students. It was not until Fall 2004 that UIC offered undergraduates an organized, credit-bearing program of community-based learning to equip them with the intellectual tools to analyze and address community issues. This pilot program, the Chicago Civic Leadership Certificate Program (CCLCP), is funded by a Learn and Service America matching grant, and its leadership resides in the First-Year Writing Program in the Department of English. CCLCP demonstrates an approach to university-sponsored collaborative community engagement that advances the research, writing, and rhetorical skills of undergraduates in a sequence of courses planned with, and of reciprocal benefit to, community partner organizations.

Midway through the first year of CCLCP, Professor of English Ann Feldman, who directs both CCLCP and the First-Year Writing Program, used a modest State

Farm Faculty Fellowship award to support the design of a CCLCP “spin-off.” While students were required to meet an ACT-score requirement to join CCLCP, the spin-off class, “Completing the Circuit: Writing Within and Without the University,” was open to any student whose placement test indicated readiness for UIC’s entry-level writing course. As Fall Semester 2005 unfolded, two students displaced by Hurricane Katrina joined “Completing the Circuit,” further broadening the diversity of student backgrounds represented in the class.

### The Diversity of Diversity

When UIC—or the City of Chicago, or the United States, for that matter—boasts of its “diversity,” the reference is almost always to race and ethnicity. UIC prides itself on being “one of the most racially diverse colleges in the nation,” presenting “hundreds of events celebrating diversity every year,” and providing “a variety of offices, centers, and committees devoted to supporting its diverse student body and staff” (“UIC Portfolio”). Public relations aside, UIC’s commitment to diversity is real; no race constitutes a majority among the student body, and CCLCP and “Completing the Circuit” students mirrored the racial diversity of the larger UIC student population.

**Racial or ethnic diversity should not be assumed to automatically produce a diversity of orientation to dearly held principles.**

But racial or ethnic diversity should not be assumed to automatically produce a diversity of orientation to dearly held principles. (Socio-economic class, we suspect, may be another matter,

although we lack student data to support this notion.) At first reading, our students’ arguments for or against Millennium Park seemed to exhibit remarkable diversity, both in the shape of their arguments and their conclusions. However, as we eventually came to see, this diversity was superficial. Whether African-American, Asian, Latino, White or “Other,” our students pegged their stances on liberal democratic topoi, particularly the notions of popular representation, majority rule, and respect for individual rights and freedoms.

### Back To Our Story

“Completing the Circuit” was designed and taught by two of this essay’s authors: PhD level graduate teaching assistants Caroline Gottschalk-Druschke and Nadya Pit-tendrih. The duo produced a community-based syllabus and co-planned class writing projects with two community partner agencies. Administrative support was provided by third author Diane Chin, CCLCP’s assistant director.

After teaching “Completing the Circuit,” Caroline and Nadya asked to be teamed again to teach the second class in UIC’s required first-year writing sequence, English 161, so they could continue offering writing students opportunities to connect traditional academic learning with the social-political, lived-in world. This plan was enthusiastically supported by Dr. Feldman, an advocate for community-based pedagogy in the First-Year Writing Program. A number of students who had taken and enjoyed “Completing the Circuit” enrolled in the spring course, along with others who had no experience with community-based writing. In the absence of supplementary funding to support planning (the fellowship award had been consumed by the fall class), Caroline and Nadya devised a spring semester course that did not include writing partnerships with community organizations, but that did engage students with the city by focusing on the role of writing and rhetoric in identifying and tackling urban issues. To employ the schema elucidated by Thomas Deans, the better-funded fall class attempted “writing for” the community, while the spring class centered on “writing about” the community.

Like all other sections of English 161, the spring semester course, “Cultivating Ethos Through Ethnography: Writing About Local Conflicts,” was expected to culminate in a thesis-driven research paper. With this goal in mind, we prepared students to act as ethnographic interviewers and participant-observers and introduced strategies for combining library research with experiential and ethnographic work. Students were encouraged to think of themselves as active, influential participants in both their university and in the surrounding city. Our plan for the course grew from a shared commitment to an engaged pedagogy that provides a rigorous academic experience and simultaneously asks, “How is this—or any—academic work relevant to the broader community?”

### **A Walk in the Park**

To answer this question, we sent students to Millennium Park, the new \$475 million, 24.5-acre jewel in Chicago’s lakefront crown. Students first read, discussed, and wrote about selections from Plato’s *The Republic*, then began research for the project we called “Democracy and Public Space.” Our syllabus describes the Millennium Park project as an opportunity “to make Plato’s idea come alive in the contemporary city,” and students were asked to “connect academic ideas with political and physical realities in our everyday world and...see that arguments and ideas have consequences in public space.” We hoped the assignment would encourage students “to begin to see the physical city as the very tangible result and representation of political and

financial arguments.” Students were offered four options for shaping their projects: stake out and defend a position on the civic controversy surrounding the creation and use of Millennium Park; make and defend a connection between Plato’s arguments and the controversies surrounding Millennium Park; craft an argument supporting a particular analysis of the rhetoric of the Millennium Park controversy; or argue that Millennium Park is or is not a “democratic space.” Almost all students chose this last option, although many papers incorporate traces of the other suggested approaches.

**Kamin is but one interlocutor in a civic discussion about a park that welcomed some three million visitors in 2005, a fact that emboldened arts critic Ward Reich to enthusiastically declare Millennium Park “our town square.”**

The controversy surrounding the creation and use of Millennium Park has focused on what Pauline Lipman, writing for the *Area/Chicago* Web site, calls the “privatization and corporatization” of Chicago, a trend that she believes overrides public interest

and control. Lipman’s concern is shared by other Chicagoans, including activists struggling on behalf of residents displaced by public housing “reform” and the rapid gentrification of certain city neighborhoods. But voices raising social justice concerns have been lost in a chorus of almost universally laudatory architectural and artistic commentary, combined with a swelling rhapsody of civic pride unrivaled in Chicago’s recent history. In an article published just before the park’s first birthday in summer 2005, Blair Kamin, the eloquent and generally level-headed architectural critic for the *Chicago Tribune*, calls Millennium Park a “joyful postindustrial playground” (1). Kamin goes on:

[The park] has brazenly discarded the old industrial age model of the serene urban park....blowing equally strong winds of change across the cityscape that surrounds it, altering a museum’s plans, boosting real estate prospects, and (perhaps) opening doors for a more innovative architecture....It has emerged as a sparkling example, despite its widely publicized delays and cost overruns, of how big cities can get things done. (1)

Kamin also contends that the park “has begun to fulfill its social promise, evolving into a widely used public space, one that is as receptive to the brown bagging Loop office worker as the tourist intent upon gawking at ‘The Bean,’ [the sculpture] formally known as Cloud Gate” (1). Kamin is but one interlocutor in a civic discussion about a park that welcomed some three million visitors in 2005 (Reich 1), a fact that emboldened arts

critic Howard Reich to enthusiastically declare Millennium Park “our town square” (1). But who is the “we” of whom Reich writes? And what about Chicagoans who aren’t Kamin’s “brown bagging Loop office workers”? Is anyone listening to social critics such as Pauline Lipman? These and other questions rendered Millennium Park a perfect subject for a community-based writing assignment.

We first asked students to visit the park and make field notes describing what they did, saw, thought, and felt during the experience. In the following class, Nadya read aloud, with conviction, Lipman’s scathing critique. In the next class, Caroline read a news release from Mayor Richard M. Daley’s office, heralding the park, and she commented that she found Lipman’s essay “way over the top.” The point of these readings was to disrupt students’ expectations of “what the teacher wants”; we hoped to provide a mildly disorientating experience so students might develop their own positions and find their own voices. At the end of that week, we sensed that while students were excited because they felt compelled and able to engage in the controversy, they also were uneasy because they could not determine our political agenda. In the end, some students produced critiques of the park that, at least on the surface, seemed to constitute an oppositional discourse, the kind that lifts the hearts of writing teachers concerned with “social justice” and “transformation.” Other students joined the majority—dare one say hegemonic?—chorus of praise. However, on closer examination, the similarities between the pro and con arguments about Millennium Park gave the instructors reason to think again.

### **Taking A Stand**

Most students, whether for or against the park, were able to craft sophisticated and well-reasoned arguments. We were particularly impressed by their lively engagement with key civic issues and their ability to stake out and defend a position amid the turbulence of competing views. The student essays fall into several broad categories. Many students criticize the park on the grounds that it is elitist and does not serve the interests of the full spectrum of Chicago society. Others defend the park precisely because they see it as promoting contact among diverse populations. This latter group argues that the park creates, as Henry<sup>1</sup> writes, “brotherhood among the people of Chicago”; these students mobilize discourses of local and global diversity, arguing that the park is egalitarian because it offers people from all walks of life an accessible recreational space. Student essays falling into a third category make what might be construed as a neo-liberal defense of the park, celebrating, as Henry does, “the beauty of the location,” while justifying in economic terms the encroachment of private

interests upon a public park. But whether attacking the park or defending it, almost every paper makes use of familiar democratic *topoi*—freedom, equality, social justice, diversity, public interest—in order to argue that the park either fulfills or betrays liberal democratic ideals.

In their arguments, our students unleash those well-learned, powerful *topoi* of liberal democracy. Many make sophisticated class-based arguments that frame the park as an inauthentic representation of Chicago because of its perceived tendency to cater to “first-class” citizens and wealthy tourists. This concern with the “true” or authentic Chicago appears in multiple essays. Chantelle’s skepticism about the park as a tourist destination, for example, prompts her to call for a more egalitarian, more representative planning process for major city projects:

It would be very interesting to know how the building of Millennium Park would have went if a survey was conducted. How did the government know that people of Chicago wanted more attractions to be in their city so that we can become more congested? The question that I really want to have an answer to is “Why does the government keep constantly building things in the city whether they know that the locals want these attractions or not?”

Note the rhetoric of representative democracy underlying Chantelle’s argument. She suggests that those empowered to make decisions affecting the interests of “the people” should first *find out what the people want*. She further maintains that if a large public investment is made without consulting the city’s citizens, the outcome cannot adequately address the public’s desires. Chantelle’s conclusion that a public space that reflects the decisions and interests of politicians and wealthy investors inherently cannot serve the “average” citizen emerges from an egalitarian sensibility. Asra argues from a similar perspective, saying, “I do not necessarily consider it a park; it is more of “first-class citizens” version of a recreational area.” Like Chantelle, Asra argues that the planning and construction of Millennium Park privileged the desires of one segment of the population over another, and she connects this privileging to economic class inequities. Asra employs a dialectic of rich and poor and interprets Frank Gehry’s Jay Pritzker Pavilion, vivid in all its stainless steel glory, as emblematic of exclusivity:

The Jay Pritzker Pavilion is a great example where citizens with high status come to enjoy and listen to the orchestra play as they sip a glass of champagne....When you go to a typical community park, you may find art



hanging around; art that is usually made by residents of the community, preferably children. Now, look at Millennium Park's many sculptures. Let's take the Cloud Gate as an example. British artist, Anish Kapoor, was inspired by liquid mercury when he began sculpting this "gate". Now, why is it that we could not get a talented artist in Chicago to do a similar project instead we asked someone from the other side of the world. Only rich people have enough money to pay for these international artists to come to Chicago and make a sculpture.

Dan echoes Asra's complaint that the park was made for the rich and for non-locals, framing his objections in the discourse of the "common people." He insists that the "little guy" should be taken into account and argues that the park's art has little or no *use value* for ordinary Chicago residents: "These people go to Millennium Park to take their family out or walk their dog but, there are no swing sets or playgrounds for the kids to play in, and dogs are prohibited in the park." Chantelle, Asra, and Dan all argue that the park's construction was controlled by the city's elite, excluding the interests of "true" Chicagoans.

Andrea makes a similar class-based critique, drawing an analogy between Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" and Millennium Park:

I feel even though Millennium Park is a fun place it still is not fun enough to ignore the fact that government officials are using this park to misrepresent the Chicago community in a way that is comparable to Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave.' This misrepresentation of Chicago could lead other cities to thinking that we have money and are of a higher class. Yes, there is a higher class in this city but the majority of Chicago's citizens are not even close to this social standing, leaving Millennium Park only to represent those select ones.

Although Andrea offers a sophisticated critique, we came to believe that we could have pushed Andrea and all of our students to complicate this rich vs. poor dualism.

The four students quoted so far object to the park's catering to a select class of Chicagoans, but other students peg their arguments not only on this class-based criticism but also on a critique of wasteful fiscal policy. They decry the park's enormous price tag while suggesting alternate uses for the money, uses that would benefit "true" Chicagoans. Jason suggests that investing in essential city infrastruc-

ture would have been a fairer and more practical civic investment: “Many people, including me, would rather have seen 475 million dollars invested in the city’s public schooling, public transportation and maybe even a smaller, similar venue worth the money, than a so-called “public space.” Similarly, Jim shows that city workers, who are required to live inside city limits but who are increasingly unable to afford city housing, are at a particular disadvantage as the city gentrifies. He argues that an increase in investment in the police who patrol Chicago’s existing parks might be more practical than building a new park, suggesting that “putting more money into the police force may also help protect and secure parks that have been built for awhile and are marked with gang and drug activity.” Arguments made in the name of representing Chicago’s authentic character, or of reflecting the real and pressing needs of a majority of its citizens, derive from discourses of egalitarian or democratic ideals. The students’ privileging of majority rule is reflected in both their insistence that city designers take their cue from what local people want and need and their impulse to speak up on behalf of citizens excluded from both the planning and use of the park.

Although these students benefited from harnessing their powerful defenses of egalitarian principles to argue that the cultural elitism of Millennium Park is the hidden engine of gentrification, in some cases the sheer momentum of the “injustice discourse” that students uncritically embraced led them to employ an exaggerated vocabulary of displacement. For example, Asra writes:

These officials sacrificed citizens lifestyles just to make this park even if it meant evicting them. Hypocritical is just the word to describe the officials who run this city. They want to portray Chicago as this amazing city to live in, but in reality, they want to decrease the number of lower class citizens that reside in the city.

While we were excited to read Asra’s analysis of how positive rhetoric about the park can mask material realities of gentrification, her claim that poor people were displaced on this piece of land is not factually true. Millennium Park was built above a rail yard; no one literally lost his or her home during construction of the park.

Dan mobilizes a similar argument in his concern for the “common people”:

The hard-working people of Chicago are primarily made up of low-paid and un-intellected. These people do not believe that building Millennium

Park was worth losing their homes, and worth the trouble of relocating after their child's school closed down.

Here, Dan capitalizes on the pathos inherent in justice-injustice arguments. Hard-working people have an apparent monopoly on justice, and Mayor Daley is demonized. The lens Dan uses heightens his investment in his own writing, but also leads him to take an indignant tone:

Mayor Daley has the audacity to seclude these people, making them feel that they are unwelcome and unwanted at Millennium Park, having security guards and cameras making sure they do not have fun in the park.

Dan positions Mayor Daley as Millennium Park's Wizard of Oz, radioing security officers with orders to confiscate Frisbees and evict undesirables from his outpost atop Frank Gehry's Pritzker Pavillion.

In fairness to students, although they may have gotten a few facts wrong, their perceptions are *essentially* correct: Millennium Park is part of a larger pattern of gentrification and beautification of Chicago, the result of which has been the displacement of lower-income residents. Indeed, we remember writing and thinking much like our students when we were 18-year-olds: we read Howard Zinn's *The People's History of the United States* and Alex Kotlowitz's account of growing up in Chicago public housing projects, *There Are No Children Here*, and they raised our political consciousnesses, made us angry, and sometimes provoked dogmatism and oversimplification on our parts, as well. So in many respects we are pleased, because our students' ability and willingness to latch on to these discourses signals their growing engagement with political life. Still, we contend that we should have urged our students to stretch their thinking.

This was the case, as well, for those students who used the *topos* of "the public good" to propose arguments in support of the park as a democratic endeavor. For example, Alex argues: "This park provides a perfect example of the city's attempt to beautify and progress Chicago's landscape through a technologically advanced and largely artistic use of space in a city that is stuck in the deep rut of conventionality." Alex routs "the beauty of the location" and claims that, ultimately, the public is served by *avant garde* art because it attracts people from throughout the city and challenges Chicagoans to think differently. He acknowledges that Millennium Park does, to a certain extent, cater to tourists, but insists that the park offers itself up to locals as well, focusing on the park's free entry and appealing artwork: "Everyone is able to

roam aimlessly throughout the boundaries of the park for hours on end, admiring all of the wonderful visual art that the majestic park has to offer.” One can see Alex claiming the notion of the “public good” for his pro-gentrification, neo-liberal, economic justification of the park.

Yet another student, Amber, wonders whether it matters that Millennium Park “masquerades” as public, as long as it successfully serves a public function:

Unlike some other major projects funded with public monies, like the renovation of Soldier Field, admission to Millennium Park is free....In Millennium Park, free concerts by the Grant Park orchestra can be enjoyed by all. In the winter, the ice skating rink can be enjoyed for free. In the spring, summer and fall, the Lurie gardens can be enjoyed for free. Views of Lake Michigan and the city skyline from the BP Bridge can be enjoyed for free. Anyone can be entranced by their reflection in “the Bean” for free. My point is Millennium Park is truly a public area which is accessible to everyone, citizens and tourists alike.

By emphasizing that all the park’s attractions are accessible at no charge, Amber makes the point that the needs of the public, including people who can’t pay admission, are being met. In this way, Amber voices concern for people of all social classes and justifies the involvement of the private sector in the park via a discourse of equal opportunity. She argues that that Millennium Park’s dependence on a mix of public and private funding provides both tourists and locals with a remarkable space, one that never would have existed without the aid of private donors. The “private,” Amber insists, does not trump the “public” in public/private partnerships:

By combining public and private funding, Chicago became the beneficiary of a magnificent, world class attraction which connects with its audience... Private philanthropy in support of civic projects is not a new idea....If some civic minded individual and corporate names are attached to places in Millennium Park, it seems a small price to pay for such a terrific place. To paraphrase Shakespeare, a rose by any other name smells as sweet.

It has been fascinating for us to unpack Amber’s powerful “neo-liberal” argument, which denies any meaningful distinction between public and private, and to juxtapose it with related, and at first glance contrasting, discourses in papers that defend public interests, or are primarily concerned with the well-being of “the poor,” “the working

class,” or “the common people.” Whether students identified in discussions with “liberal” or “conservative” political positions, whether, in the case of these essays, they favored Millennium Park or attacked it for elitism, almost every student relied upon a rhetoric of democracy as the bedrock of his or her particular argument. The similarities between the rhetoric of neo-liberal solutions (“Let the market take care of all problems, including those of inequality”) and traditional liberal democratic discourses of equality and “the public interest” gave us pause.

As composition teachers steeped in both liberal democratic values and in the rhetorical tradition of public deliberation, we were eager to teach our students to value both democracy and argumentative skill as democracy’s fundamental tool. So we cheered them on. Yet, at the same time, we felt uneasy. We have come to see that even within democracy, power can be arbitrary, violent, and exclusionary. The almost irresistible moral power of the *topoi* of “justice” and “democracy” are all-encompassing, intoxicating, and, we believe, worth interrogating because, as orthodoxy, they blind us to alternative modes of being, thinking, and arguing.

### **Be Careful What You Ask For**

Perhaps it should come as no great surprise that students’ papers rely on *topoi* plucked from the limited spectrum offered by the rhetoric of democratic values. After all, we set up narrow parameters within which students crafted their arguments. We now recognize that the label we affixed to the assignment—“Democracy and Public Space”—as well as the tone of the first writing assignment, in which students were asked to respond to the anti-democratic elitism they had detected in Plato’s *The Republic*, may have encouraged our students to produce indignant arguments, replete with the “god-terms” of the liberal democratic tradition. Thus, when they visited Millennium Park and read about the controversies surrounding its creation, they inevitably viewed the park through the lens of liberal democratic justice: they saw Plato’s distrust of “the people” as suspect because of its potential for justifying the consolidation of power in the hands of an elite class, and their counter-arguments emerged from the liberal democratic tradition. Wherever students detected the corruptions of power within Millennium Park’s space or implementation, they said that, instead, power should have been given over to “the people.” The power-to-the-people move promises to make power “just,” by distributing it, by making it available to more people, and by opening it up to public critique.

Not only had we set the terms of the debate when we designed the assignment and

chose the readings, but students also read and responded to each others' papers throughout the drafting process, which may have further contributed to the use of shared vocabulary and related lines of argument. For example, when Dan, who ultimately attacks the park, begins by conceding, "The city of Chicago is a great melting pot of culture and diversity, and Millennium Park was built to exemplify that culture," he seems to be in dialogue with Henry, who writes of "brotherhood":

Contrary to views against the Millennium Park initiative, Millennium Park should serve as a beautiful recreation area for the promotion of brotherhood among the people of Chicago and their visitors. The Park should not be viewed as a gentrifying, neo-liberal, distraction to compete with similar parks in New York City, Miami, and other attractive urban cities. Instead, Chicago should learn to enjoy the beauty of the location.

Here, Dan and Henry, long-time friends who partnered during writing workshops, share the assumption that diversity and multiculturalism are high values—the only dispute between them is whether or not the park can be praised as multicultural. So Dan appears to be answering Henry directly when he says the park betrays multiculturalism, even as Henry seems to be rebutting Dan's claims that "the new gentrification of Chicago is part of a competition between multi-million dollar conglomerate privatized companies, and the poor and low-paid citizens of Chicago."

Nevertheless, as teachers, we missed our chance. While we engaged in lengthy discussions among ourselves about the ideological overlap we found in students' papers, we wish that we had brought this discussion back into the classroom. We could have asked students to compare, and not just contrast, their neo-liberal and Marxist critiques, thus challenging their own habits of thought. Challenging students to recognize the surprising similarities among their justifications on the basis of "equality" might have introduced an element of skepticism about both positions and prompted students to defend their positions more rigorously. Or even better, they might be encouraged to search for positions that escape liberal orthodoxies, or that flare from the collision of neo-liberalism and demands for greater social justice.

Our students' essays gave evidence that it has become all too easy and all too common in 21st century America to justify almost any political and ideological claim by wielding the rhetoric of liberal democracy, including the common and useful *topoi* of individualism and equality of opportunity. As writing teachers, rhetoricians,

and citizens concerned about the course of our nation, we see a possibly dangerous trend that students must be helped to recognize and examine if they are to become responsible civic participants.

## Challenging Orthodoxy

As evidenced by the student writing we've shared here, our students rose to the challenges presented by this assignment. They were able to apply some high-flown academic ideas to a significant contemporary civic debate. Despite the papers' errors, they are the most richly textured, lively, and spirited student essays we have read in our collective teaching experiences. We attribute this success to our students' competence at making connections between their own engagement in the world around them and abstract academic topics, including neo-liberalism, Platonic philosophy, and the public sphere. Readers may be wondering at this point, what more could we possibly want? After all, there's only so much an instructor can do in a single semester. And in fact, we have wondered if perhaps we ought to pat ourselves on the back and get on with our lives. Yet we worry that in our enthusiasm for launching students into the "public sphere," we simply threw them, with inadequate preparation, right into the heart of the democratic hurricane. We might have practiced, with our students, a more thorough "unpacking" of deeply ingrained beliefs, a pedagogy that Thomas Deans describes in discussing the community-based critique that occurs in Bruce Herzberg's classes (95).

**Our students' essays gave evidence that it has become all too easy and all too common in 21st century America to justify almost any political and ideological claim by wielding the rhetoric of liberal democracy.**

To a certain extent, we sold our students and their abilities short. We assumed, when we planned the course and especially the writing assignments, that it would be difficult to induce our students to engage in democratic discourse. We felt that a glimpse of competing opinions on Millennium Park would equip students with the tools they needed to probe Chicago's new orthodoxy of "progress" and "civic beautification." What we found, however, is that almost all our students were well-equipped to tap into these democratic arguments without much help. While we do pat ourselves on the back for offering our students both an entrée into civic life and the skills with which to make persuasive arguments in that sphere, we did not make as much progress as we might have toward our primary goal of encouraging students' critical thinking. We found that the most interesting, engaging, and astute papers were those that did not simply follow a pat political script ("The park excludes the homeless,

therefore it's unjust," or "The park is the site of jaw-dropping public art, therefore it's great"), but rather revealed the students' struggle to question orthodoxy and think and write outside their comfort zones. Strong and effective writing is never orthodox, no matter its political position. Strong arguments are not pat arguments.

If competent writing is writing that diverges from scripts, political or otherwise, what about diverging from the democracy script? We could not help our students do that in part because we were stuck in the thickness of our own version of democratic orthodoxy. It took this writing assignment, and reading 30 papers that ended up being about democratic orthodoxy, to help us see the narrowness of the framework we created.

**Whether we are social justice liberals or post-democracy theory heads, we, too, are frequently blind to our own assumptions. The key pedagogical move is to help students challenge orthodoxy, including the stuff we hold most dear.**

Students are keen interpreters of their environments, and many universities, including ours, are bastions of liberalism. We may have done our students a disservice by not encouraging them to examine liberal democracy's founda-

tional beliefs. Ideally, we would offer students entrée into a possible critique of the rhetoric of democracy itself. We are not suggesting the deployment of anti-democratic *topoi*; we don't want to simply provide students and teachers with another "script." But if our own studies in rhetorical and political theory have taught us anything, it is that we can and should always work to uncover unquestioned assumptions. Whether we are social justice liberals or post-democracy theory heads, we, too, are frequently blind to our own assumptions. The key pedagogical move is to help students challenge orthodoxy, including the stuff we hold most dear.

We wish we had encouraged students to consider arguments less dependent on democratic *topoi* in the assignments prior to the Millennium Park project. This would have stymied, to some extent, students' ability to invoke democracy as a trump argument. Certainly, we wish we'd named the assignment something other than "Democracy and Public Space." We can't help but think that if we had not framed democracy as an unquestioned (and, perhaps, unquestionable) good, then the resulting papers might have been not only well written but also well considered. Undoubtedly, many students still would have produced "pro-democracy" papers, but even those papers would have grown more robust from bearing the burden of having to argue the strengths of democracy itself, rather than simply invoking the democracy script as unassailable "proof."



We still believe the Plato and Millennium Park assignments are a winning combination. Giving equal weight to the two sets of readings allows students to consider the pressing importance of an otherwise “dead” text. Further, their understanding of Plato impelled our students to intervene in a “live” civic debate. We encourage other teachers to frame assignments by setting up readings and responsive writing projects as a conversation in which students have a stake. But we believe it is our job to embolden students to enter that conversation *without the safety net of a trump argument*. This pedagogical feat cannot be accomplished simply by introducing students to additional competing voices—itsself a neo-liberal solution. Only a focused effort to enable critique of the assumed moral goodness of any concept can enable students to fly without a net. Once students begin to consider their own assumptions, they may be able to critique discourses that hold so much sway in public life: democracy, justice, equality, rights, freedom, America, and so on. It is their own critique that will reveal to them the secret heart of power relations.

We recognize the difficulty of what we are suggesting. We already must cram too much into a 16-week semester. Some teachers may feel that it's difficult enough to encourage students to begin to consider even democratic, egalitarian arguments without launching them on a critique of democratic rhetoric. But our experience has shown that students arrive in our classes as sophisticated thinkers and social beings, already quite adept at mobilizing the rhetoric of democracy in service of a variety of political and ideological agendas. If part of our job is to teach students to become critical readers, both of the texts and worlds around them, then it also must be our duty to teach students to be critical readers and consumers of *their own ideas*. We understand the challenges this poses to students and teachers alike—it's no walk in the park just to identify one's own foundational beliefs, let alone critique them—but we believe it's the only way to go.

## Note

1. Student writing is quoted with permission, but the writers' names have been changed. We have not edited student writing for correctness in the hope that readers will notice that even grammatically and orthographically challenged student writing can, and frequently does, convey impressive ideas.

## Works Cited

- Berlin, James. “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class.” Ed. Victor Villanueva, Jr. *Cross Talk in Comp Theory*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1997.

- Boyle-Baise, Marilynne, and James Langford. "There Are Children Here: Service Learning for Social Justice." *Equity and Excellence in Education* 37 (2004): 55-66.
- Deans, Thomas. *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition*. Urbana IL: NCTE, 2000.
- Herzberg, Bruce. "Community Service and Critical Thinking." *College Composition and Communication* 43.3 (1994): 307-319.
- Kamin, Blair. "The Millennium Park Effect." *Chicago Tribune*, 26 June 2005, Sec. 7: 1+.
- Kotlowitz, Alex. *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America*. New York: Doubleday, 1991.
- Lipman, Pauline. "Whose City Is It, Anyway?" *Area/Chicago* Issue 1 (Summer/Fall 2005). Area Chicago-Stockyard Institute at DePaul University School of Education. 21 June 2006. <[www.areachicago.org/issue1/whoscity.htm](http://www.areachicago.org/issue1/whoscity.htm)>.
- Manning, Sylvia. "Chancellor's Message." 2006. *Great Cities*. University of Illinois at Chicago. 21 June 2006. <[www.uic.edu/homeindex/gc\\_chancellor.shtml](http://www.uic.edu/homeindex/gc_chancellor.shtml)>.
- O'Donovan, Leo J., S.J. "Equal to the Demands of Justice in the World." *Learning to Serve: Promoting Civil Society Through Service Learning*. Eds. Maureen E. Kenny, Lou Anna K. Simon, Karen Kiley-Brabeck, Richard M. Lerner. Boston: Kluwer Academic, 2002.
- Plato. *The Republic*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1955.
- Reich, Howard. "How Millennium Park Created a Unique Nexus of Culture." *Chicago Tribune*, 28 May 2006, Sec. 7: 1+.
- Stanton, Timothy K., Dwight E. Giles, Jr., and Nadinne I. Cruz. *Service-Learning: A Movement's Pioneers Reflect on Its Origins, Practice, and Future*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.
- "UIC Portfolio." *University of Illinois at Chicago*. 31 Oct. 2006. <<http://www.uic.edu/portfolio/diversity/index.html>>.
- Zinn, Howard. *The People's History of the United States*. 1980. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.

**Caroline Gottschalk-Druschke** is a graduate teaching assistant and doctoral student in English studies at UIC; her interests bridge urban studies and rhetorical, political, and feminist theory.

**Nadya Pittendrigh** is a graduate teaching assistant and doctoral student in English studies at UIC focusing her studies on poetry and writing pedagogy.

**Diane Chin** is assistant director of the Chicago Civic Leadership Certificate Program, and a doctoral candidate in English studies at UIC; her in-progress dissertation analyzes pro-service-learning arguments that inspire resistance to service-learning.