

## Review:

**Stephen Parks. *Gravyland: Writing Beyond the Curriculum in the City of Brotherly Love*. (Syracuse University Press, 2010)**

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**I**n Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, through the efforts of the working class community by which he was raised, Stephen Parks was given the opportunity to attend college. In his book *Gravyland: Writing Beyond the Curriculum in the City of Brotherly Love*, Parks narrates his own successes and failures with community partnerships during his time as the director of the Institute for the Study of Literature, Literacy, and Culture at Temple University in Philadelphia. Throughout the book, Parks gives a voice to community writers who were previously silenced, giving back to the working class communities by which he was raised, and, eventually, giving a voice to other marginalized groups as well. The community members tell stories of heartbreak, hardship, and happiness, but the underlying issue is ever present: their voices have been silenced. One community writer, Margarita Rojas, explains what it meant to be a woman in her community by saying, “I was going to continue studying, but tradition dictated otherwise. It was more like, ‘Women shouldn’t study because eventually

they get married and never practice their profession” (163). For many community members, like Rojas, the projects outlined in *Gravyland* mean having their voices heard for the first time.

Parks’ goal in writing *Gravyland* is threefold: he wants to (1) open dialogue about communities becoming part of the college classroom, (2) create classrooms that value the mass of knowledge which develops through community dialogue, and (3) share stories in which students recognize their education as the result of entire communities’ efforts (xiv). In Chapters 1–4, Parks provides examples of community-based learning while providing readers with theoretical analyses of each experience. Through the successes and failures of *Urban Rhythms* and New City Writing, Parks creates a timeline of events that anyone interested in developing community-university partnerships might benefit from studying. His testimony is indispensable to those in academia who are working to establish and sustain community-based programs in outcomes-based institutions.

As Parks guides readers through his experiences, he anchors his stories with the established theories of Paula Mathieu, Henry Giroux, Ira Shor, Paulo Freire, and others. For example, in Chapter 1, “Writing Beyond the Curriculum,” Parks tells about an Advanced Composition course which analyzed popular music as a means to examine the “political response by the working class to mainstream cultural values” (3). Throughout the course, students began to tell their own stories: they felt that school never respected their working-class values; they shared stories in which they turned to music so they could reside in a culture in which their voices were valued, even if that meant turning away from education. With their collective stories in mind, the students began—above and beyond any assignment—a journal for Philadelphia public-school students to write about their working-class culture. *Urban Rhythms* would show value in the community voices. Although the students developed this initiative without prompting from their professor, Parks explains that their actions were rooted deeply in “existing theoretical and disciplinary paradigms” (5). With references to scholars such as Shirley Brice Heath, and activists such as Thomas Dewey, Parks gives readers the theoretical structure of his students’ actions; he shows the theories that might suggest his students would be successful.

The goal of *Urban Rhythms* was to open a dialogue between community members about literacy; unfortunately, the outcome seemed to further separate community members into different factions—each working toward disparate goals. Parks’ inclusion of theorist, scholarly, and activist goals in “Writing Beyond the Curriculum” only validates the students’ attempt to give voice to a community. Regardless of the project’s ultimate dismantling, Parks characterizes the students with dignity and intelligence, never once suggesting that the project’s failure was their fault. This message of dignity-despite-outcome emerges as a main theme of the book; with community-based learning, there will always be small failures. No two community partnerships are the same, and there will always be room for improvement, but the message of persistence permeates *Gravyland*. Parks’ ambition and optimism could easily inspire all members of the community—students and faculty alongside politicians, administrators, and middle-class workers—to actively pursue change in society. His book acts as a community-based learning manifesto of successes through surface failures.

The most important message of *Gravyland* is exemplified in Chapter 5, “The Insights of Everyday Scholars,” in which Parks generously gives the community sixty pages in his book for their own writing—in both English, and in their native languages. He explains that giving voice to a community “represent[s] a sustained argument about who is an *intellectual*” (130). In “The Insights of Everyday Scholars,” Parks gives those voices an even wider audience. Throughout the book, Parks argues that real knowledge is created through the mixing of multiple voices from different parts of the community—university faculty, politicians, students, and the working-class. In this chapter, Parks shows his profound trust in and respect for all members of a community. His devotion to the message becomes more than just words in Chapter 5; more important than any other message in *Gravyland*, Parks leads by example and allows his voice to mingle with the voices of the community to “provide a partial representation of the collective voices that have been a vital part of our success” (131). One community writer, Mayra Castillo Rangel tells readers, “Since living in the US, I like the liberty, my freedom. I’m no longer a submissive Mexican woman, meant to be only a wife and mother” (173). In just one line, Rangel proves herself to be an empowered immigrant. Parks explains that “increased corporatization of the

university further facilitates community disempowerment" (196). The independence and strength of community writers like Rangel is vital to the success of Parks' goals; the community voices included in *Gravyland* echo empowerment as the writers share their stories and insights.

The final chapter, "Success," paints a picture of Parks' experiences in shades of optimism and progress. Despite the struggles and momentary failures of New City Writing, Parks explains the successes embedded in the program and argues "for the importance of composition and rhetoric programs that develop strategic spaces (as opposed to tactical interventions) to support community-based partnerships and progressive literacy programs" (192). His argument—based mainly on the successes and experiences of New City Writing—proves useful to the faculty he addresses in the beginning of the book: faculty who are working to prove the efficacy of community-based learning in outcomes-based institutions. Parks' work is especially important in an academic climate where the majority of faculty think "that working with public schools and community groups or implementing expansive service-learning pedagogies should *not* count as scholarship" (xxxvi).

In the end, readers might be left looking for expanded explanations of the underlying theories Parks uses to pepper his narrative. Someone without an extensive background in community-based learning might miss some of Parks' references and allusions to scholars and activists who came before him. Even still, *Gravyland* brings readers through multiple community partnerships, their successes and surface failures, and how those experiences might have changed if the partners acted differently. The community writers represented in *Gravyland* offer a great deal to the work of service learning and community publishing—their voices remind readers that, all too often, academics forget to listen to their own community members. Even more, the insight and intellect present in every voice confirms Parks' notion that anyone and everyone is a scholar in their own right. Parks' detailed account of his experience proves to be irreplaceable for those in any part of the community who wish to open dialogue about literacy and education.