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Keyword Essay: The Streets

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In composition studies, “the streets” is a term frequently employed to delineate a tangible public space and/or the discourse emerging from it, particularly outside the bounds of government or other institutions (such as universities), where people interact and live. The streets also represent a site of protest for political or social change, as when people repeat the mantra *take it to the streets!* In his 1963 March on Washington speech, Civil Rights leader John Lewis stated, “I appeal to all of you to get into this great revolution that is sweeping this nation. Get in and stay in the streets of every city, every village, and hamlet of this nation until true freedom comes, until the revolution of 1776 is complete.” Many people believe that embodying this ubiquitous public space guarantees them a venue and an audience for their discourse, particularly when it takes the form of dissent.

As a result of the streets’ symbolic importance, it is the streets where community literacy scholars increasingly seek to establish and maintain a presence. As Christian Weisser notes in *Moving Beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere*, “If our conversations about public writing are to have any real value, we must work toward connections with other disciplines, discourse communities, and individuals inside and outside of academia” (xiv). Engaging with the community means that professors and students alike must transition from the comfortable space of the university and enter into the mobile, material space of the community: into the streets. As tangible spaces built for movement, the streets also contain *movements*—political or otherwise—and activists’ mobility is often captured on mobile phones, thus allowing for a double presence in virtual spaces. As material spaces grounded in communities, the streets provide rhetoric and composition scholars tangible connections to those local communities. Nedra Reynolds explains that “Street practices . . . are of increasing interest to composition and literacy studies, as service learning, tutoring and community writing programs invite students to explore the streets and cultures of local communities” (113). The streets are simultaneously the connection points to these communities and where communities exist.

Using the term “the streets” as a reference to tangible, real-world publics allows rhetoric and composition scholars to localize public discourse in a tangible space. John Ackerman and David Coogan, in the introduction to their edited collection *The Public Work of Rhetoric*, argue that “the street” is a term that gives public rhetors a concrete entry point into all public discourses, particularly those beyond protest rhetoric. Ackerman and Coogan assert that “The *street* as a figurative device, from [André] Breton to [Charles] Baudelaire to more recent scholarship, configures much more than an angry display of political unrest. The street materializes as it represents the prospects of a radically inclusive democracy of human experience” (8). Coogan

and Ackerman see the streets as a located metaphor for public discourse more generally within a democracy—a material arena outside the university in the civic space of a city where citizens freely participate in the exchange of ideas.

The sections that follow explore how “the streets” has emerged within scholarly conversations about community engagement, particularly as scholars seek to effectively define, enter, and engage with local communities. The first section examines how scholars have used the streets as a metaphor for public space and discourse in an attempt to reify the abstract constructs of “local publics” and “communities.” By pinpointing these community sites, scholars can more readily identify where community literacy thrives and enter into those spaces. The second section looks to critiques of the metaphor of the street, examining how some scholars interrogate the negative connotations associated with it. The final section examines how the physical streets have played a role in research and pedagogical practices in community literacy, both as a barrier or as a connection point. The aim in this essay is to unravel how “the streets” serve as a metaphor and a material reality in community literacy practices.

The Streets as a Concrete, Mobile Metaphor

In her 2005 book *Tactics of Hope*, Paula Mathieu explicitly seeks a contemporary re-adoption of “the streets” as a metaphor for public space. She believes scholars seeking to engage with the public have a responsibility to enter into the streets. Mathieu states, “Long-term success for public-oriented composition works depends . . . on . . . devising timely and spatially appropriate relationships in the streets where we work” (20). Mathieu uses the term as a concrete “metonymic reference point” to differentiate academic and nonacademic spaces, eschewing what she considers less satisfying and more opaque terms “such as *community*, *sites of service*, *contact zones*, *outreach site*, *etc.*” (xii). In this way, “the street” emerges as a popular shorthand term for communities—useful because its concreteness allows scholars to speak in tangible terms about these communities (Ackerman and Coogan; Farmer; Mathieu). While Frank Farmer criticizes Mathieu’s direct “conflation of ‘the public and the streets’” (7), he goes on to argue that Mathieu’s use of “*street* functions here as a kind of synecdoche, a term that encompasses many of the ways that composition studies imagines its relationship to the larger public” (7). In other words, although it is used as a metaphor, “the streets” is intended as a representation of a pervasive physical space where public discourse occurs, an important clarification for Farmer.

Many other metaphors for spatially situating public discourse have been proposed. Elenore Long employs the term “local publics,” which she defines as “symbolic constructs enacted in time and space around shared exigencies” (15). In defining local publics, Long acknowledges there are real world barriers (“time and space,”), though these barriers are quite broad. Long goes on to identify and explain several spatialized metaphors for local publics that scholars have employed. Some of these metaphors include “an impromptu street theater” (Shirley Brice Heath); a “cultural womb and a garden,” (Deborah Brandt and Caroline Heller); or a “shadow system” (Ralph Cintron). These metaphors, like all metaphors, are valuable in that

they allow scholars different access points from which to examine “local publics.” However, in academic and non-academic texts alike, “the streets” has emerged as the most popular shorthand for these kinds of localized communities, perhaps because the networks of streets themselves are so complex and embedded within public life. Nedra Reynolds notes that “Of all cultural locations, the street is perhaps the most contested, the most up for grabs, and the most provocative” (110).

The term “the streets” also offers a name that captures transitions, fractures, connections, and interconnections in a physical space, particularly as they apply to those located communities without explicit names or associations. In his seminal 1984 text *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau notes that walking through a city can often complicate borders that people attempt to create, such as drawn-up borders and proper names. To him, walking or movement is “broken up into countless tiny deportations” and that the “urban fabric” of a city is not a single place but bodies’ movement and interactions and passing through (de Certeau 103); what we term a “City” is not a place but a ceaseless action, a movement (103). In other words, the place of the city is not a single, static geography as people might imagine; instead, much like Heisenberg’s Indeterminacy Principle, what we perceive as a place is our mind’s eye is but a screenshot of bodies that are constantly in motion. Even the buildings that we see in a city are simply the city’s response to movement: the residences and sidewalks and streets, which have emerged to accommodate that movement (103).

“The streets” has allowed scholars to envision a concrete place without sacrificing this concept of ceaseless mobility, which is inherent to the streets. Mathieu explains that, “Moving from the university to the streets means that the rules that prevail in the classroom or the dean’s office no longer apply” (xi). It is this movement and mobility that “the streets” as a metaphor capture, and that rhetoric and composition scholars have begun to examine closely. The Thomas R. Watson Conference 2016 theme was “Mobility Work in Composition,” which sought to unpack the concept of mobility, asking participants the following: “In what ways might mobility get taken up in practices and rhetorics of activism in engagements across divides of institution, discipline, program, location, and language?” As community literacy adopts mobility as an undergirding force in “located” places, pinpointing that mobility gives rise to the “streets” as a located, moving, divisive, connective tissue that bridges and divides communities and institutions.

Uses and Problems of the Metaphor

“The streets” has likely emerged within community literacy studies as a popular metaphor because of its popular use *outside* the academy. The simple fact is that, unlike other metaphors generated to represent communities, “the streets” is the term used by many people who identify as part of the streets. Thus, our discipline’s use of the term can be seen in two ways: 1) as co-opting a term used by people who identify with the streets, or 2) as joining these people in employing their own terminology. In David Coogan’s 2014 article in the *Community Literacy Journal*, he analyzes poems and essays of men in prison, in which those men were asked to “write about a place

they know well” (21). One man, Israel, writes, “Girls or beefs, school or the streets, hustling or study hall, these shouldn’t be hard decisions to make at all” (24). Israel identifies the distinction between an academic place he knows well (the school) and another place he knows well (the streets). Coogan employs Israel’s term when he writes, “Why did he [Israel] choose life in the streets?” and then proceeds to unpack that question in the following paragraph. Israel is a man outside the academy—a prisoner—who identifies the streets as a knowable place. Perhaps because someone of the streets (Israel) identifies the streets as a knowable place, that is why community literacy scholar David Coogan wants to enter them as well, and why he chooses to use the same term that Israel uses to describe this place.

In her book *Street Sex Workers’ Discourse*, Jill McCracken recognizes a distinction that the “street” adds to sex work, fastening work in space and time. Rather than sex work generated through the Internet or other means, McCracken sees “street sex work” as a unique entity, involving “those persons who solicit or exchange sex on or near the street, in cars, hotels, truck stops, or outdoors, as opposed to using telephones, the Internet, or other referral systems” (xix–xx). McCracken also explains how the streets leave sex workers exposed:

Because of its location, street-based sex work can contribute to one’s lack of control over events because participants are vulnerable to arrests and assaults . . . those working on or near the street have the fewest resources, work in the most dangerous circumstances, and face the most harassment from the police and other people who may assault or exploit them. (xxvi)

In other words, it is a sex worker’s locatedness in the unstable place of the streets that makes him or her vulnerable and less empowered. Because of the illegality of their profession, there are no designated “safe” zones where sex workers can labor in accordance with socially accepted rules, norms, laws or customs, so they must turn to the streets.

The two examples here—one of a prisoner and one of a sex worker—suggest that marginalized groups, such as the homeless, are more generally associated with streets. In their community literacy work and scholarship, both Paula Mathieu and Phyllis Ryder partner with and write about “street newspapers,” which “support homeless people who want to make their voices heard” (Ryder 171). Just as the widespread use of the term “urban” as a euphemism for poor black people is problematic, using “the streets” as a coded term for marginalized people can be problematic, too. Many scholars who employ the term (including Mathieu and Ryder) articulate the difficulties of adopting it. Mathieu explains that, “*Street* carries connotations of homelessness, gangs, and poverty. Wealthy people tend not to spend much time in the streets, and when they do it’s often within . . . gated communities or sidewalks in gentrified neighborhoods” (xiii). Farmer takes this metaphor a bit further, explaining that using the term “the streets” is a social commentary “about what our public realm has become: an evacuated, abandoned space inhabited, for the most part, by those who ‘live the streets,’ who do not have the resources

necessary to (comfortably) partition their daily lives” (Farmer 8). Only the poor or disenfranchised are left to the streets; people with means have gotten into their cars and driven to their homes or jobs, thus “partitioning” their lives *away* from the streets. The streets, in turn are left as discarded, undesirable places—a problematic and/or useful conception of public space, depending on one’s intention when using the metaphor. Considered from this angle, the metaphor encourages community literacy scholars and practitioners to reflect on the impacts that privatization and wealth distribution have on public space.

The Streets as Space for Research and Pedagogy

The streets as a physical space—not only a metaphorical one—have also been crucial to community engagement and community literacy studies. Oftentimes, the physical space of the streets proves not to be a connection point but instead a barrier between the academy and the local community. Ackerman recognizes that the way streets built is rhetorical: intentionally built as a means of connecting, isolating, dividing, or avoiding communities. In his piece “Rhetorical Engagement in the Cultural Economies of Cities,” Ackerman explains how Kent, Ohio has a “commercial district [that] does not hum with the street life of a university community” (84), largely because in 1970, “the city built a wall in the form of a boulevard . . . ensuring that the artifice of the city . . . was broken in two” (87). This concept of building a street as a barrier to a university echoes Linda Flower’s sentiment that “In the 1960s, we began building walls around our urban ivory towers to protect them from the decay our flawed expertise hadn’t averted” (156). Ackerman champions a new development plan for streets that “[reconnect] the city and the university by bicycle, by foot, by history, and by artistic and deliberative tradition,” which, in turn expected to reconnect the city of Kent with Kent State University. In this sense, community literacy scholars are actively seeking to examine the physical (and rhetorical) space of the streets that connect them to local communities.

As researchers, feeling rooted in our local streets can boost our understanding of our own research. Liz Rohan examines the streets as they exist currently as an important connection point to her archival research of Detroit-born missionary Janette Miller. In Rohan’s present-day experience of the same city, the streets of Detroit become an etching of memory for her; unlike papers or photographs, they still exist, and because of this, she argues they are as important to the more traditional archival artifacts such as letters and photographs: “These texts *were outside my car window*. These texts, ‘Warren [Avenue],’ ‘Grand River [Avenue],’ signified real streets but were also pulling me into . . . a composition of sorts [that] linked the past and present” (244). The archives that Rohan had uncovered about Janette made Rohan want to understand the present composition of her city; the way Janette had described the streets “taught me to think about these streets with curiosity and in an intimate way . . . I yearned to get on these streets” (243). In other words, Rohan felt a physical connection to the material space of the streets, which connected her with her research on Janette Miller across time.

Pedagogically, the streets, particularly those surrounding universities, have important implications for how scholars work. In *Public Pedagogy in Composition Studies*, Ashley Holmes writes about the material difficulty of getting students to move beyond the streets of the university where they are comfortable and into the local communities: “many students live in the greater metro Atlanta area, commuting miles on interstates to come to campus, and know little about the local, public context in which their school is situated” (22). Holmes notes that community engagement can only be fostered once students “[venture] beyond the few city blocks where their classes are held and their car is parked” (22). The streets are, in this case, a barrier to student engagement; the interstates divide students from the communities around their university. Driving and parking a car near campus allows students to easily insert and remove themselves from the local communities. However, other scholars note that once students recognize the space of the street as part of the community, it can be an easy connection point for them to reach out to unfamiliar people. In “The Word on the Street,” Diana George and her students work with street newspapers, and she comes to realize that this street work and this street discourse is important pedagogically because it values the simple, day-to-day, and often forgotten community members, giving them—and students seeking to engage with them—a material space “where to begin” (18). The public writing that emerges from the streets emphasizes “the extraordinary words or ordinary men and women writing for local, little known causes” (18). For those instructors who are unsure how to take practical steps to incorporate or encourage community literacy practices in their classrooms, entering the material streets outside their doors may be an easier first step than diving into the haze of an undefined community.

The streets serve as a critical framework through which community literacy scholars, both as researchers and pedagogues, can envision, enter into, and participate in local community literacy practices. Whether conceived of as a metaphor for a geopolitical research space or considered materially as a concrete place that can connect or divide community members, the streets are public spaces where people of all walks of life will continue to enter into and transition through. The streets, viewed as texts themselves, provide local publics an unmediated, localized space for public discourse and self-publication, whether through street newspapers or embodied protests. Given their ubiquitous presence, scholars will continue to explore these sites as material representations of public spaces, seeking to understand the discursive processes by which “the streets” have been and continue to be written and imagined.

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