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Every Person Is a Philosopher: Lessons in Educational Emancipation from the Radical Teaching Life of Hal Adams

Eli Goldblatt
Temple University, eligold@temple.edu

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Every Person Is a Philosopher: Lessons in Educational Emancipation from the Radical Teaching Life of Hal Adams

William Ayers, Caroline Heller, and Janise Hurtig (Eds.)

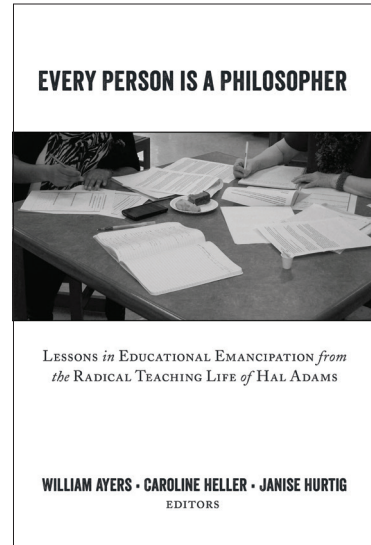
Peter Lang, 2016. pp. 152

Reviewed by Eli Goldblatt

Temple University

I met Hal Adams face-to-face only once. We went together to a Chicago public school where professional actors performed an ensemble of more than a hundred texts published over seven years in his *Journal of Ordinary Thought (JOT)*. I felt shy with Hal at first, but his warm manner quickly put me at ease; he seemed to accept me as a friend in our common work. Steve Parks and I had started New City Writing in 1997, and when I told my old friend Bill Lamme in Chicago about our plan to publish work written in neighborhood writing groups we organized, Bill said I *had* to read Hal's magazine. Bill arranged for Hal to send us 5-6 issues of the journal, and *JOT* was a revelation to us. The idea was simple yet stunningly direct: organize writing groups within small neighborhood formations and publish the work the participants wanted others to read, without academic editorializing or prearranged agendas. We immediately adopted *JOT* as a model for our early publications at New City Writing Community Press, and Hal was quite supportive of our project. When I visited Chicago (possibly for Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1998), Hal invited me to see a preview performance of the play and hang out with him for an evening. I remember it as a powerful Spoon River Anthology-type show, rooted in African American neighborhoods of Chicago, and I remember too feeling that we'd found an ally who really understood what community-based writing and publishing could do.

Hal's work is little known in community literacy circles and hardly at all among composition/rhetoric scholars trained in English Departments (except some who studied at University of Illinois-Chicago in the nineties). He had been a tenured professor at the University of Iowa but gave up regular academic rank in order to teach primarily in neighborhood settings, first briefly in Seattle and then for seventeen years in Chicago, working in association with UIC but not as a full-time faculty member. He does have a following among education scholars and



independent activists interested in grassroots organizing. He published only a few academic articles on his neighborhood writing work, in places that English-trained students are unlikely to encounter. But his effect on the people he taught in his writing groups, as well as the students and colleagues who knew him in Iowa, Seattle, Chicago, and Minneapolis during his lifetime, was long lasting and transformative. The field of popular education lost a precious contributor when he died in 2011 at 72.

In 2016, Peter Lang published a valuable collection of work by and about Hal entitled *Every Person Is a Philosopher*. I urge readers to buy the book, read it through, and share it with others. You will savor the rich combination of commitment and compassion that characterizes his prose and appreciate the stories his former colleagues and students tell in their essays. His opening essay, “A Grassroots Think Tank,” is worth the price of the book alone. It provides a straightforward description of his practice, with a brief indication of his theoretical indebtedness to Antonio Gramsci, Paulo Freire, and CLR James. It gives greater attention to the women and men who participated in his workshops. This essay should be adopted immediately into the canon of invaluable texts among community literacy scholars and activists. The statement printed at the beginning of every issue of *JOT* comes from Gramsci: “Every person is a philosopher.” That could be the watchword of our profession.

The other pieces included in the collection will be worth reading as well. Caroline Heller, one of the editors, supplies a detailed look at the workings of a men’s group that Hal mentions himself in the “Grassroots Think Tank” essay, self-described “villains” who put together an issue of *JOT*. Entitled “Through the Eyes of a Villain,” their profane and painful observations stand out in my mind as one of the highpoints of the run. Annie Knepler, the only comp/rhet scholar in *Every Person is a Philosopher* and an example of a UIC alumna who gained from knowing Hal, adds a moving piece about how she applied Hal’s insights in her own writing group experiences. Janise Hurtig—another editor and a colleague who worked closely with Hal on writing groups, extending the project into the Latino community—contributes a valuable theoretical commentary on Hal’s work. I am particularly grateful to Janise for articulating the “contradictions of Freirean problem posing” (40), when the progressive teacher can’t help but reinforce the pedagogical hierarchy by posing problems for students to confront. She helpfully shows how Hal avoided the trap, though I doubt that many of us could do as well as he did.

Other articles in the volume apply Hal’s approach to youth poetry workshops, reveal undergraduate TESOL students’ response to Hal’s “Grassroots” article, and trace Hal’s leftist activism roots. In an article on cross-cultural applications of Hal’s pedagogical principles, Stephen Mogge and Kate Power tell a memorable little story. At an NCTE symposium, Hal was asked “What do you do?” in response to the inequality, economic injustice, violence, and politics that hamper any significant transformation in people’s lives. They recount that “Hal took a deep breath, thought for a moment and, ever the philosopher himself, responded “Well, I show up.” This is a Zen koan-like parable one might live by, and yet the authors add great value by demonstrating what “showing up” means in different situations.

Sadly, the book does not include an article Janise and Hal wrote together in the period when they were working on the publication that succeeded *JOT* called *Real Conditions*. That article, entitled “Creative Acts, Critical Insights,” goes into greater depth on the methods and goals of the writing group initiative as it brings to life the mission of *Real Conditions*: “Only the collective efforts of ordinary people can make a better world” (158). The emphasis on the collective, always a part of Hal’s pedagogy, prevents the Gramscian motto of *JOT* from seeming purely individualistic. Together, these two statements suggest that Gramsci can be realized on American streets, but only through a practice that truly does not elevate teachers above learners.

This is a slim volume, and yet I can’t describe all its virtues for practitioners and theorists alike. You just need to read it. The book ends with an essay assembled from reflections and stories Hal wrote over his time in Chicago, and fittingly it is filled with the stories and words of ordinary people he met in his travels to housing projects, recreation centers, elementary schools, and churches. He was a well read and thoughtful man, informed especially by radical left politics in the civil rights and anti-war movements, and yet his writing is never dominated by jargon or complex analysis removed from the simple fact of showing up and writing with others. He says in that final essay: “But mostly when I think of power in relation to these writing workshops I think of some individuals whose lives were changed by the writing experience, and whose writing changed the people who read their work” (130). This is a teacher who learned from his students as a matter of habit and principle, discipline and nature. I wish I could have known him better, but I’m grateful at least that we have this collection to remind us of the profound politics of his pedagogy.

Works Cited

Hal Adams and Janise Hurtig. “Creative Acts, Critical Insights: Adult Writing Workshops in Two Chicago Neighborhoods.” *Community Partnerships: Case Studies in TESOL Practice Series*, edited by Elsa Auerbach. NCTE, 2002, pp. 147–158.