Gravyland: Writing Beyond the Curriculum in the City of Brotherly Love by Stephen Parks

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Recommended Citation

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In *Gravyland: Writing Beyond the Curriculum in the City of Brotherly Love*, Steve Parks explores the political and social complications and implications of a number of university and community literacy partnerships that originated in and around Temple University in Philadelphia between 1995 and 2004. Parks especially works to interrogate his experiences in the privileged "gravyland" of academia and his "attempts to 'pour and pass' its resources to the working populations" in the surrounding community (xxix). Narrating his own successes and failures in connecting community needs to university resources, Parks also associates community literacy efforts to the larger mission of rhetoric and composition. Situating his work and this book in the field of rhetoric and composition and generating insights relevant to practitioners in not only that field but also to academics across disciplines and community stakeholders interested in pursuing community literacy partnerships, Parks points to "liberal-radical politics and open-admissions policies of the 1960s and 1970s" in addition to the increasing institutionalization of service learning and "writing beyond the curriculum" (xv). Moreover, the author connects his work and thought to English departments' movement toward cultural studies pedagogies committed to "a broader vision of a progressive education and democratic processes" (xx) via interdisciplinary studies, political activism, and community involvement.

Critical pedagogy, too, in the work of Henri Giroux, Ira Shor, and Paulo Freire, helps Parks to articulate the connection between education, writing studies, and political and social action. Cultural studies and critical pedagogy, Parks observes, intersect with rhetoric and composition in the work of scholars like Ellen Cushman and Paula Mathieu: "powerful models of individual commitment to a community-based university" (xxiii). Parks's own work, though, comes from a desire to make those partnerships even more substantial. Building from Giroux's ideas, Parks pursued the efforts

he chronicles in *Gravyland* to generate "counterspaces within universities," or places to oppose the institutionally supported, "conservative efforts to privatize and corporatize public institutions of literacy" (xxiv). *Gravyland* features the attempts that Parks and other university and community members made in Philadelphia as they worked toward the development of a counterspace for writing and literacy programs that supported, embraced, and included multiple voices from their specific communities. Parks begins telling this history of his efforts to engage in "writing beyond the curriculum" by entering into the much discussed debate in rhetoric and composition between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae on the concept of "voice." Elbow puts the power of students' writing into their conveying of self in individually focused personal writing, and Bartholomae argues for the centrality of academic writing and the acknowledgment of students' socially constructed positions. Parks, on the other hand, points to the advantage of understanding voice in relation to community/university partnerships and designates voice as "necessarily hybrid" (2). To demonstrate the necessity of these hybrids, or multiple intersecting and contradicting voices, Parks tracks the results of *Urban Rhythms*, a university writing course that asked students to critique their own cultural experiences and to work with public school students and later a range of community members to tell their own stories. In particular, he notes how public school teachers suppressed students' voices by calling for a limited range of "multi-cultural" narratives, and the *Urban Rhythms* curriculum similarly failed to take students' and community members' simultaneously personal and constructed voices into account by fully considering their political dimensions. That additional political connection, Parks suggests, could have come from involving relevant community organizations and partnerships in classroom pedagogy. Not just any partnership, but community-university connections that "take on a more expansive view of partnership based on an alternative and oppositional model of hegemonic politics—one that recognizes the need to respond directly to the coercive power of the state" (36). To explicate this expanded theory of partnerships, Parks discusses the formation of, and complications related to, the Philadelphia Writing Centers Project. Initially, the project began as a small effort connecting university students as tutors to public school classrooms, but the program grew as the school district's management and desires to increase standardized test scores became increasingly involved. Parks explains that the program mistakenly assumed that "embedding" the writing center project into the school district would actually "strengthen the initiative" (64). Instead, this move shifted the writing centers away from what Michel de Certeau calls the "edge," where opposing and changing discourses overlap and interchange, toward a more immovable, strategic center. Parks concludes that literacy programs should position themselves on this productive "edge"—as "one partner