Community Literacy Journal

Volume 1
Issue 1 *Fall*

Article 6

Fall 2006

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David Coogan
Virginia Commonwealth University, dcoogan@vcu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Coogan, David. "Community Literacy as Civic Dialogue." Community Literacy Journal, vol. 1, no. 1, 2006, pp. 95–108, doi:10.25148/clj.1.1.009533.

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Community Literacy as Civic Dialogue

David Coogan

This essay describes service learning as a space for civic dialogue. In the project-oriented course discussed below—an oral history of a south-side African American neighborhood in Chicago—civic dialogue took shape when middle class students from a range of backgrounds at the Illinois Institute of Technology interviewed residents of different generations and experiences, transcribed, contextualized, and published these interviews in print and online, and reflected on the process. As a tethering of "community" across the material and discursive boundaries that typically divide us, the project performed a political critique not through issue-oriented advocacy but through a rhetorical activism more locally attuned to the absence of critical exchange, empathy, and understanding in public life.

Because the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) is located on the south side of Chicago amidst the densest concentration of public housing in America—an island of five city blocks in the middle of the infamous State Street Corridor, which runs four miles long—students and faculty tend to be skittish about walking around the neighborhood. Not only is it filled with poverty, but also all that comes with it: gangs, drugs, violence, unemployment, welfare dependency, and a crumbling economic and physical infrastructure.

This, anyway, is the story we tell. And admittedly, The Story serves its purpose. There are some dangerous areas in the south side neighborhood known as Bronzeville. But, insofar as The Story disables clear thinking about people, it too can be dangerous: a lack of information and experience can lead to a lack of understanding and empathy that, in turn, can lead to prejudice. Or so it seemed to me that there was a problem with the way we faculty and students represented the residents of Bronzeville to each other: words like "projects" or "gangs" could not characterize the community as a whole or even fairly describe the complexity of real lives. And I felt this problem could be addressed, at least at the level of public perceptions, if students could hear from the residents about their lives—if we could find neighborhood stories that could be recorded, transcribed, and re-presented to the residents and the campus community as an oral history of Bronzeville. Toward that end, I organized a service learning project and a dozen students signed up.

The innocence of the project was immediately called into question, however, by the community activists I contacted for advice. They had critical questions about our credibility, our motivation, and even the projected value of these stories in their ongoing struggle to advocate for the community. I readily understood that much could be gained from constituting a community in struggle. I also realized that much could be lost or flattened in that characterization, as Ronald Greene explains: "Rhetorical studies wants to produce students who

are committed, not indifferent, to the discourses of a public." Yet those discourses, including advocacy, may sometimes cultivate that indifference when they place the requirements of identification ahead of the opportunity to do inquiry. When that happens, I believe we need to hold advocacy in abeyance a little while and create a space for civic dialogue.

Civic dialogue forms a continuum with advocacy in an open but inevitably partial attempt to cut through the commonplaces that keep us apart. It tethers "community" across cultural barriers, constituting a space for critical exchange. In the project that I discuss below—an oral history of Bronzeville involving middle class and working class African American residents and middle class students (white, black, Asian, Indian, Pakistani)—civic dialogue took shape in the process of interviewing middle-aged and young-adult residents about their lives; researching neighborhood history and contextualizing the residents' stories within it; designing the magazine that presented the stories; reflecting on the process of writing with and about the residents; and reacting to the residents' reactions to the work. This was a deliberate attempt to engage people with less opportunity to participate in public life (I am thinking here of the students as well as the residents); an enactment of what Linda Flower might let me call intercultural inquiry "lite"; or what Paula Mathieu would charitably call an "insufficient" but radically hopeful community literacy. By challenging "The Story of Bronzeville," the project challenged participants to see public discourse as a space where subjectivities may be constructed and critiqued, honoring the material force of history ahead of the History that would contain us. In these ways, I argue, the project performed a political critique of classism and racism, not through a rigorous analysis of political arrangements or through issue-oriented advocacy, but through a rhetorical activism more locally attuned to the absence of dialogue, empathy, and understanding in public life. And this was what made it a hard sell to the activists.

When I framed the goals of the project to the activists as an inquiry about "community," I contradicted their vision of a "struggling community." This can be seen in the response I received from one of the activists who publishes an online magazine documenting the struggles of public housing residents:

> I am uneasy about these plans to gather and disseminate "the stories of Bronzeville." I see a danger of a naive, subtly disrespectful form of deference on the part of IIT students. The likely outcome is an amalgam of sentimental narratives and false, tendentious history that doesn't significantly alter perceptions or build relationships. These are complicated acts, telling a story, hearing a story, entrusting another with a story, being worthy of that trust. What equips you and your students to collect and disseminate "the stories of Bronzeville?" Your literacy? Your access to technology? Your good will (which I don't doubt)?

We were equipped, of course, with nothing but a desire to work past our own poor constructions of Bronzeville so that we could relate to "the projects" differently and hopefully help others do the same. But these desires to appropriate a space or even to be entrusted with residents' appropriations were not only not enough. They were suspect. This activist even seemed to discount the possibility of entering public discourse this way, labeling our proposed collection a likely "amalgam of sentimental narratives and false, tendentious history." And he was not alone. Another activist, whose nonprofit company rebuilds abandoned properties and offers heritage tours of the historic Bronzeville, responded to my request for an interview with something like contempt:

What do these highly intelligent young adult students know about the landgrab going on in Bronzeville? What happens to low-income African American people in Bronzeville, when the land that they have lived on since the turn of the 20th century, becomes more valuable than the human beings who inhabit it? How will these interviews impact these questions in a positive and proactive way? Again, if these students are interested in interviewing me, they need to have a basic understanding of the protracted struggle for economic and cultural self-determination that African Americans have waged in the Bronzeville community over the past 100 years. Otherwise, it is a waste of my time to be talking to a group of arrogant, well educated, and prosperous young people from well-to-do families from all over the world, who have no idea of what significance the promised land plays in the story of the Great Migration.

From class readings and guest lectures the students certainly knew about "the protracted struggle for economic and cultural self-determination" in Bronzeville. From campus gossip, they knew about the land grab. But they also knew that they didn't like the way this man had positioned them as arrogant. They also noticed that his standard for gauging the success of our project was to "impact" the gentrification debate in a "positive and proactive way." Both activists, that is, imagined an oral history of Bronzeville as a form of advocacy.

Civic dialogue forms a continuum with advocacy in an open but inevitably partial attempt to cut through the commonplaces that keep us apart.

These critical questions about our motivations, objectives, and outcomes were not unfounded, nor did I see them as unhelpful. I was grateful they'd responded at all. They helped me understand the difference between advocacy and the intercultural inquiry that I was pursuing here. As Linda Flower describes it, intercultural inquiry challenges participants to

> move out of the adversarial stance of advocacy, to rise from the comfortable chairs of complaint and blame reserved for the powerless and from the seats of authority and expertise held by those in power, to abandon for this moment the familiar postures of protest, on the one hand, and official advice, on the other. This approach to an intercultural (versus simply cross-cultural) dialogue asks people to put aside privileged and/or familiar ways of talking to one another in order to enter a far less predictable rhetoric of inquiry. (49)

Though my project did not establish the forum that Flower calls a Community Conversation—a problem-solving space mixing talk and text, with an emphasis on "rival hypothesis" making and finding the "story behind the story" in stakeholders' positions—it did establish an inquiry that "operates, by definition and by choice, in a space where discourse practices and complex networks of situated knowledge are known to differ." Moreover, Flower continues, intercultural inquiry "chooses to build knowledge on the constructive potential and reflective agency of everyday people" (43). This is a radically hopeful foundation for rhetoric that constitutes agency "in" the organized interplay of discursive practices, a process that is difficult to control, because, as Kurt Spellmeyer suggests in another context, "subjects never occupy a single, safe position in discourse, but a 'space' permitting a variety of roles whose adoption entails a degree of risk, the risk of error, incoherence, and a loss of authority" (75).

To open oneself to that process on one's own is hard enough. To open it wider through a collaborative process extends that risk even further, but ultimately promises a greater return on situated knowledge.

In that sense, I would argue that the residents took significant risks in addressing themselves to us in stories about their grandfathers, mothers, neighbors, neighborhoods and ancestors. And we took risks, too, following these stories on their own terms while resisting the "bigger" stories of struggle that the activists favored. "When I had initially envisioned this project," wrote Mei-Sun,[1] in one of her weekly memos to me about her work,

> I had, for some crazy reason, assumed that people would just automatically spill their guts about their lives to a bunch of college students armed with tape recorders. We would (I had thought) have all these amazingly fascinating stories about people who grew up in Bronzeville. They would tell us how the Civil Rights movement changed their lives or how they used to live next door to Gwendolyn Brooks. Well, the Chevy Chase Nursing home interview gave me the reality check I needed. People just don't talk to strangers about their lives. Most people don't even think their lives are all that interesting. I mean, if someone asked *me* about *my* life, I'd say what the people I interviewed with said: "It was nice." Unfortunately, "nice" doesn't really cut it as a story. It's going to take a lot of proving to find actual stories.

Expectations about hearing heroic narratives of the Civil Rights movement or fabulous encounters with literary luminaries were difficult to let go. But even more humble narratives could be difficult to elicit and even more difficult to analyze. What Mei-Sun needs to "prove," in other words, is that she and her classmates will be able to seek and find "actual stories." Celeste Condit helps us understand why in her elaboration of a materialist orientation to rhetoric:

> A materialist account of language thus recognizes that the past has existences and consequences that are not and cannot be fully articulated (language being an inherently reductionist and displacing medium). These material consequences are never independent of the meaning-making function of language and other cultural symbol systems, but they exert a force that is not solely a product of those systems. Consequently, linguistic materialism specifies that historical narratives are more than simply products of the ideological agendas of narrators. They are complex interactions among the narrators, the audiences living in the present, and the artifacts of the past (including discursive material artifacts such as documents, the lived language bequeathed to the agents of the present, and other nondiscursively articulated material conditions). (177)

What Condit wants to reserve in history is the unarticulated in the inarticulate; that which we have not mined from the "time stream" of history and that which we cannot mine. She does this not to mystify a force of history that is inscrutable to language but to resist a reified notion of ideology—of ideas that produce language. Naturally, ideological agendas influence "the complex interaction" among narrators, audiences, and artifacts, and this can be productive in oral history projects, provided everyone remains open to the inevitably "reductionist" and "displacing" qualities of language. The value of pursuing that process, despite these limitations, can be seen in the stories we did manage to generate and publish

online and in print as *Digital Stories from Bronzeville.*[2] These stories established unexpected common ground between the storytellers and students out of the "lived language bequeathed" to us all, as "agents of the present." In the following pages, for example, Jerel Tolliver reflects back on how he learned to be a man, Gloria Yearby remembers how her grandfather supported her family, and Paula Robinson praises the early African American entrepreneurs.

Male and Female Roles

"Southern traditions taught mannerism, taught respect for women and respect for yourself. They were still instituted in the homes back in those days and my mother and grandmother were strong believers of that. My dad, who came up from the South for whatever reason he and my mother split, I was just two years old... My mother made sure that she raised gentlemen first and foremost, who were going to respect themselves and respect others. It also meant survival, of her children, to raise us up as men who she knew were strong enough to deal with diversity and that's important to deal with diversities because diversities is a part of who we are and a part of what's coming at you everyday. ...Now that I look back at it, she was mature in those areas and she knew what was going to come down the pipe for her children.

—Jerel Tolliver

Here Comes Granddaddy

"We would meet him at the bus stop on payday, cuz he never would buy a car. He always caught the 31st Street bus. And he'd come home, and we'd meet him at that corner, right by Dunbar High School. We'd meet him. *Here comes Granddaddy!* And he'd be running to meet us. And he would run and play with us like he was our *father* cuz our father was always constantly going and working. You know we never saw him, he was always at work. So my grandfather kinda stepped in and took his place, you know. He would run and play with us. He could have been at work, he'd have a *hard day* at work but he still would run that *whole* block. My grandfather! Run that whole block with us."

—Gloria Yearby

Charles Prather

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Enterprising Spirits

"As a business person, I am very fascinated with the business, I guess the business ---- just the concept of not being able to have banks and insurance companies and the things that'll allow you to assimilate well or to stabilize your family, your income. So we wanted, not only in our freedom to have a job, but we also wanted to do more than be someone's sharecropper, where you never own anything. And so we had the group of entrepreneurs who decided, you know, someway, even though there was no way that you could have a bank or have insurance or get a charter or anything, other things that stop us today saying they won't let us or they won't whatever. These entrepreneurs just decided that they were going to and they did. So, I am very empowered by that spirit.—**Paula Robinson**

This building on 34th and King Drive houses a popular coffee place, "Jazz 'n Java". The café features poetry nights on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Christmas Fruit

Family photos from Gloria's collection.

"He [Gloria's grandfather] was a great inspiration to all of us. We all miss him so much. Every holiday, Christmas, he would give us a bag of fruit. That was his gift to us. He couldn't buy us all toys. So he knew the fruit man you see, and they would give him a deal on different nuts, oranges, apples... and the Fruit Man, you know all those people passed before my grandfather passed. All those men. And they stopped. And we didn't know who to contact after them. To keep the tradition going."—**Gloria Yearby**

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What Jerel emphasizes in the story of coming to Chicago is his mother's lessons about respect and diversity; Paula's story about her life in business draws lineage to the "spirit" of black entrepreneurs who came before her; and Gloria describes the "inspiration" of a grandfather who set traditions for the family. These were stories of love, respect, courage, and solidarity. But clearly, the stories could have been told differently. Jerel's story of his mother teaching him how to respect women could have emphasized his absent father. Paula's story of black entrepreneurs could have dwelt on the constraints of segregation and racism. And Gloria's story about Christmas without any toys could have emphasized poverty. But the storytellers

did not tell the stories this way, which prompted an unexpected identification with them, writes Mei-Sun:

> Even the most mundane stories made you think. It's hard not to start comparing their lives to yours, or your parents. Sometimes I was struck by how similar people's experiences are. Their experiences and my experiences. Other times, I couldn't help but think—boy, are things different in my little world.

Our worlds, true enough, were very different. Though some of us had parents or grandparents who grew up in poverty, none of us had experienced it firsthand. And yet, we had—or felt we wanted to have—a grandfather like Gloria's, a mother like Jerrel's. Our connections created community, then, despite the obvious differences we noted in stories that were more situated in the present. Consider, for example, Tanya Jackson's story about her life in public housing:

perceiving **CHANGE**

Growing up on 51st and State

"This is how people who never lived there think. *'They bad, they stupid, uh-uh, I ain't going over there,'* but this is how people in the projects thinking. *'Dude, I aint' goin' over on Wabash. They bad'* They thinking the same thing y'all thinking!

I've lived in Louisiana Baton Rouge, I've lived in Milwaukee, I've lived in Tennessee, I've lived in Minnesota, I even lived on a navy base on Great Lakes, but I've never felt as comfortable as I did in the projects, you know why? Because people there feel like they're outsiders so everybody in the projects, they come together. And they help each other, you know what I'm saying? It's like we feel like we the minorities and everybody is out to get us. That's our mentality, growing up on 51st and State

People in the projects is no different than people outside the projects, it's just that we think different because we feel like, there ain't nobody gonna help us, we here to help each other. And that's what they *do* in the projects, they help each other! Whereas when I moved to Milwaukee, my first apartment outside the projects, I moved there, girl I couldn't get a cup of sugar. I couldn't get a cup of sugar! But if I was in the projects, go on get your sugar, she'd be like here you go, here's the *whole bag!*

I love the projects though, it was so—so much love. You have to be *born* and *raised* there to *feel* it, because if you come from the outside into the projects you gonna be thinking, well I gotta stay to myself, save up my money and move out.

But people in the projects, it's different. ..... it's just that...we have gang-bangers in the projects, we have shootings in the projects, you know what I'm saying? We have *all* that, but I'm gonna tell you one thing about the people in the projects, *no one* is about to get raped, if you get raped, before that person who raped you come out of that building, he gonna be dead before he get to the street. They gonna do something about it! He gonna know not to come back there again. Whereas if you on Wabash, they be like, girl you call the police.

People in the projects care about people in the projects. And they *down* for each other. You know when I used to go to the store, my kids be asleep, and I'd be like y'all I'm fitting to go to the store, go watch my house you know, 'til I get back. When I come back my kids be well taken care of, and they be still asleep, and they'll watch my kids. You know you can kick it like that, whereas you can't do it nowhere else. You know what I'm saying? If you ain't got it, they don't look down on you."—**Tanya Jackson**

Chicago's State Street Corridor, a four-mile stretch of public housing, contains the nation's largest and most densely populated continuous stretch of isolated high-rise public housing. Robert Taylor - B will be the site of significant redevelopment through the demolition, ultimately, of sixteen dilapidated high-rise buildings unsuitable for family living, construction or acquisition of low-density housing on-site and off-site, and the development of badly needed commercial and industrial facilities. Since 1995, the CHA has demolished 1,190 units of public housing.—*from CHA website*

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To Tanya, life is different—and, in her view, better—at 51st and State, because the community is strong and filled with solidarity. About her attempt to live outside the projects—the apartment in Milwaukee—she writes that she "couldn't get a cup of sugar." This only reenforces what she knows to be true—that "everybody in the projects, they come together." To Raj, who heard the story, however, there was an additional conclusion to draw:

> I think this interview was an eye opener as it showed us that most people are under a totally wrong impression about the black community as a whole. Tanya threw light on the fact that the "projects" are not what we think them to be but quite the contrary.… She showed us that there was as much love and affection in the "projects" as there was in any other society, and they are not merely crime-infested places as certain people imagine them to be.

Not only do people come together in the projects, but they come together just like "any other society."

It could be argued, of course, that Raj's reading not only contradicts Tanya's criticism of life outside the projects but forces a dubious identification with the storyteller; that the "love and affection" that ties Tanya's community together is, in fact, born of an opposition to the middle class world (white and black) outside of the Robert Taylor Homes. It seems more likely to me, however, that Tanya wanted Raj to understand that her years in public housing were not years spent in a racial ghetto but in a community. What she chooses to emphasize, in other words, is not the hostile relations that would seemingly emerge when a group of people feel that "everybody is out to get us." What she emphasizes instead is that "people in the projects care about people in the projects. They down for each other." In the same vein, I would argue that the reason why Gloria chose not to talk about the Bronzeville of her childhood (the 1950s and early 1960s) as a segregated neighborhood with a failing infrastructure—or why she did not dwell upon the fact that her father rarely had time for the children because he worked long hours in the stockyards—was because she wanted us to understand that her childhood was not spent in a "neighborhood in decline" or in a "non-traditional family" but in a real neighborhood, in a home filled with love. In a thank you note she sent to the group at the end of the semester, Gloria explained, "To have grown up in that neighborhood during those years created lasting impressions of the people not only as neighbors but as extended families that will last me a lifetime. Thank you all for bringing to life again those memories of the neighborhood we now call Bronzeville."

We all begin where we are. To see our beginnings as something to share, however, is to see our development as indispensable to democracy.

The process of generating these stories—interviewing, transcribing, editing, reviewing—was not just a literate practice, then, but a rhetorical process of "assembling and circulating subjects," as Ron Greene puts it, which are "capable of recognizing themselves as a subject of, by, and for a public." What the residents and students assembled and circulated in the name of a public was a relatively innocuous and wholesome idea of community that contradicted the excesses of "ghetto," even when the storytellers' experiences seemingly contradicted these

claims, as it did in Tanya's admission of "shootouts" and "gangbangers" in "the projects." This is not to say those connotations matter less, but that they were not the ethical ones that integrated these particular subjectivities into the common ground of the oral history. As Greene explains in his reading of Michael Warner's work, "speech genres often are invested with an ethical substance capable of generating the norms of stranger relationality. Thus, speech promises the reconciliation of self and other in the name of democracy." Had we begun the project with a judgment that articulated those "norms of stranger relationality" differently, say, as a struggle against racism or classism, the understanding of "community" earned here would have been jeopardized. At the same time, of course, while we go about tethering "community" with humanistic discourses of love or family, the discourse of struggle cannot—and should not—be silenced.

Civic dialogue can be placed on a continuum with advocacy, in that case, when we foreground the act of critique in both. This can be seen in the following reflection from Farukhh. Note how he distinguishes himself from his friends in this hallway chat about the problems in the neighborhood:

> At nights sometimes one can hear gunshots from the dormitories, and we could only guess whether it was for fun, or if someone was actually shot at, and we invariably guess the latter, although, in all fairness, it might very well have been the former. Among ourselves we often talk of the depressing environment of IIT, which is invariably blamed on the location of the college in the middle of crime-infested, low-class housing projects. I have felt and feel depressed, perhaps not consciously because of the environment, perhaps subconsciously it has had some negative effects on me. To myself I would scoff at my friends' blatant, simplistic comments about the dilapidation in Bronzeville, for I thought blaming one's problem on one's environment, and further, ascribing its creation to others, was simply too easy. If we distance ourselves from the cause, and yet blame it for our problems, can we really expect to find a solution to the problem?

Amazingly, what bothers him most is not the sound of gunshots near his dorm but the sound of his dormmates analyzing the inner city. He hears in their comments a strange capitulation. They blame the environment: they become their environment. Farukhh's response resonates responsibility—to himself, to the community. But it's plain to see that he struggles with that. He begins by registering his depression. Then he abruptly forces it out of his way. What this leaves him with is a commitment to "find a solution to the problem," one that he does not quite know how to honor. And yet, this attempt to formulate the problem differently—to fashion a position for himself—is what marks him as a rhetorically active citizen: Farukhh's essay, in that sense, is not a confessional aside but a constructive appropriation of public discourse. We all begin where we are. To see our beginnings as something to share, however, is to see our development as indispensable to democracy. Consider, as additional evidence of this claim, the way one of the four African American students in the project, Danielle, begins and ends her semester:

> When I signed up for this class, I had the following expectations: to learn more about my people—a part of my ancestry that I am not very familiar with; to understand how the people of Bronzeville survive from day to day knowing that their neighborhood is considered to be dangerous and is the prime target for gentrifica-

tion; to help my teammates to understand that not all "Black" people are lazy and are in gangs but are a people filled with spirit and who have varied cultures.

In these lines Danielle establishes herself as an informal truth commission. And indeed, she was quite effective: when another student presented his research to the group—grim statistics on education, home ownership, average income, and employment—Danielle spoke out against it. Statistics can lie, she argued. Statistics can lie. And the group was persuaded that those statistics, placed next to the stories we had been developing, would only re-assert "The Story of Bronzeville" with which I began this essay. Danielle then turned to Gloria's story about her grandfather—reading it over and over. She was mesmerized by the love in

everyday CULTURE

An Era Gone

"We mostly like "Dusty" music, which is old music. The Motown sound because that was what we were raised on. I do like music from the Big Band era. I like a lot of Duke Ellington. 'Cause we use to go to the show then Red Saunders was still playing and he is one of the old band leaders. So just basically the jazz. I don't like rock, I don't like hip-hop. I don't like rap... Songs had more meaning and the delivery of the song along with the music, you know it had a definite beat. Something that you could relate to. A lot of music too, later music, I don't know what you would call it. They um, it doesn't have anything that kinda touches you on the inside. Like my husband likes the song, "Always and Forever"... That era is gone. I don't hear that soulfulness, the sincerity of the words. I hear them singing words and saying words but just don't hear that depth that is coming from within here [points to her heart], inside, you know. And even though back then, I'm sure that they was singing too to make money and to live well. But it was different. I mean, if you walked up and saw "The Impressions" walking down the street or "The Temptations" that they were doing a show and then if they felt like stopping at the light post and just singing, you know, they would do that. As if it was no big deal and you would just... I mean if something hit them and they would sing that's just what they did. But that didn't stop you from going to pay your money to go see them sing that same song."—**Deborah Brown**

The Regal

"This was 47th street in the 1930's [pointing to a picture]. This is the backside of the Regal Theatre. Well, right here is an ally and my husband and I and everybody else in the neighborhood. Because all of us would go to the show together for the show, it's a back door and you could go in that back door and you could just stand there because it was the stage door to the Regal theatre. And you could catch the stars as they were coming in to perform and they would talk to you and sign your little autograph. You know, we would all be screaming and hollerin'. [laughter] It was cool."—**Deborah Brown**

"The Regal was a *huge* place. What consisted of Regal, was on the corner of 47th, 47th and King Drive, formerly known as South Park, the Fuller company—ask him about the Fuller company, too, that was a cosmetic company, Fuller—Fuller was on the side of the Regal, going East. Then you had a Walgreen on the north side on the street. Then you had a clothing store on the north side of the street. But the Regal encompasses all of the Fuller Products. *Huge* company, black-owned. By this family."—**Gloria Yearby**

Doorman in front of the new Regal Theater at its opening in 1927. Fess Williams was the opening act.

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that story of a tired old man who would joyfully "run that whole block" with the kids after he got home from work. This was the spirit of African Americans that she had been looking to capture at the beginning of the term.

Yet on the final day of the project, with boxes of the journal at our feet and a public presentation just hours away, another resident, Deborah Brown, told Danielle that she was very disappointed with the way Danielle had portrayed Deborah in the journal.

Because her interview was transcribed literally ("hollering" became "hollerin' "; conversational "ums" were preserved) and because so many of the other stories were uncensored (one man talked about his parents' weekends out as "nigger's night" in Bronzeville), she felt the journal as a whole created the wrong impression not just of her but of African Americans. Danielle tried to make sense of the event in her journal.

> It bothered me all weekend, mainly, because I had intended on speaking with her before sending the print journal to be printed (I like keeping my word). I thought about what she said when she had mentioned—that her and her husband are educated people and that the print journal made them look ignorant. At first, I couldn't or I wouldn't understand her point of view, but while reading another book this weekend for my sociology class, there was an article that quoted blacks from the south side of Chicago. They quoted blacks the same way in which we did in our print journal. Needless to say, I felt quite insulted by the message that the author was sending or so what he seemed to be sending across; that all blacks speak a particular way and that because they talk this way then they must be uneducated or poor or ignorant. Now I understand why she felt that our print journal was horrible. Although it expressed a side of the people in Bronzeville, it didn't express the individual (in terms of their education levels, training, involvement in the community).

After pushing away what she "didn't want to understand," she forces herself to reconsider the experience of offending Deborah in light of what she read in her sociology textbook. At this point she sees that she had been "sending across" the message to Deborah that "all blacks speak a particular way." She is hurt by the realization but rewarded with a new understanding of race and class in her writing and her life. Spellmeyer explains:

> When writing and reading engender a dialogue between world and text, familiarity and difference, then the concealed history of knowledge—Adorno's "unconscious remembrance"—becomes a subject for conscious reflection. And once, by extension, I no longer regard the order of things as inevitable, but instead see the world as meaningful only through my deliberate activity, knowledge reveals to me, over and over, the fact that I am implicated in its past and its future. (57)

What the incident revealed to Danielle was that she could no longer regard her African American status as transparent to a fellow African American. "The order of things" was no longer "inevitable" but something that became "meaningful" through "deliberate activity" with another. And while she maintains that our journal represented "a side of the people of Bronzeville" she concedes that it did not represent Deborah's side. What bothers her, finally, is that she failed to deliberate meaningfully with Deborah about representing her side.

What, then, are we to make of Danielle's experience? On one hand, she did prove what she

set out to prove—that not all African Americans are poor and uneducated. But she also unwittingly characterized a fellow African American as poor and uneducated. Taking full responsibility for the mistake did not take away the painful part of the experience anymore than Farukhh's restatement of "the problem" of Bronzeville took him any closer to a solution. That is so because, as Greene suggests, assembling and circulating a subjectivity is "a process that is always unstable and marked by failure." That civic dialogue will sometimes fail should not overcrowd us with caution, however. On this point, Paula Mathieu has argued instead that we should embrace the "radical insufficiency" of community literacy. In her experience, that is, teaching homeless men and women how to write did not adequately equip them with the skills they need to change their status as homeless. But it did enable hopeful alternatives, especially when writing became a collaborative practice, as she illustrates with the story of producing and performing a street play, "Not Your Mama's Bus Tour":

> Many scenes had nothing to do with homelessness at all, because the writers wanted the audience to see that being homeless was just one aspect of their lives. Homeless did not explain who they were or encompass their identities. Thus, music, both recorded and live, dancing, and poetry were all elements of the tour. There was humor, too, especially in the playing with stereotypes. (80)

That the play drew a "paying public" ready to hear "stories about living with debt, experiencing police brutality, discovering sexuality, and finding hope" as well as reviewers who praised it suggests to Mathieu that "this improbable utopian project did manage to create a new, albeit temporary, reality" (82). And that is reason to celebrate. What Danielle, Farukhh and the other students and storytellers enacted publicly makes sense to me, then, even in its irresolution, because I believe citizenship is a process not a possession; an appropriation not an acquisition. If we don't use it we lose it or become encrusted in some older vision of it that cannot really sustain us.

Imagining civic dialogue this way—a construction site for community, a functioning place with no real facade or formal entrance—might be a little awkward. In our collective imagination, citizens and civic spaces are usually configured quite differently, as forums where advocates assume an important and leading role. Like statesmen-orators in ancient Greece, advocates seem to model an ideal form of citizenship, taking up morally justifiable causes and making timely, persuasive statements that influence stakeholders, engineer consensus, or win resources.

In both service learning and rhetorical theory, this sketch of the ideal citizen is often traced to John Dewey, because Dewey was concerned not only with public discourse but with reforming public education in such a way that it could strengthen public discourse. Tom Deans, for example, has argued that in service learning "no single voice is more significant than that of the guiding spirit and chief philosopher of progressivism, John Dewey" (4). What Deans admires in Dewey's approach is the integration of pragmatic problem solving, reflective inquiry, and the "free exchange" between citizens that deepens the meaning of their experiences and binds them together in common cause (18). Ronald Greene, who has traced Dewey's influence in rhetorical theory, adds that "within the orbit" of Dewey's pragmatism, the discipline of Rhetoric finds "the tools for the moral development of the eloquent citizen" (189). And therein lies the appeal.

Yet Greene also notes that the emphasis on moral development, eloquence, and shared experience depends upon a transparency in language that contradicts the reality of postmodern capitalism. Unlike Dewey's era of rapid industrialization, which depended upon rhetorical eloquence to unify "social fragmentation" in the public sphere (196), postmodern capitalism in the service economy actually "relies on communication for the production of value" (199). What Deans and other interpreters of Dewey tend to overlook, then, is the contradiction between the subject of progressivism and the subject of postmodernism. To recognize this contradiction, Greene suggests, is to recognize that "an aesthetic-moral theory of communication can no longer offer a counterforce to the crisis of democracy because this very theory of the subject currently underwrites the changes in the production process of postmodern capitalism" (196). What Greene suggests we do instead is abandon the attempt to resolve social fragmentation through a moral-aesthetic theory of eloquence and look instead toward the "history of communication as a modern form of self-fashioning" (199). In Greene's hands, inquiry is a political critique of "new forms of capitalism" that "use communication as the wedge to create a global 'control society' " (197).

Though Greene sees political critique of capitalism as an appropriate expression of resistance, it is unclear how critique would actually work. What I have presented above in the civic dialogue about "community" in Bronzeville hopefully offers one way of putting critique to work: if capitalism created the politics of racism and classism that created the segregated neighborhood of Bronzeville, then it would seem that an oral history project challenging those material and discursive boundaries could, in fact, be considered a political critique. In the very least, it could be considered what Greene elsewhere calls a "delivery apparatus that makes it possible for strangers to partake actively in the circulation of public discourse." And so, if we can see political critique as a larger impulse admitting a variety of rhetorical practices, beginning with inquiry and ending with identification, then it becomes possible to see civic dialogue along a rhetorical continuum with advocacy. And having argued elsewhere for an articulation between service learning and social change in the form of a materialist rhetoric that aims to discover, analyze, produce, and assess interventions in the public sphere (Coogan), I would like to make that case.

Civic dialogue sponsors much-needed critical exchange among citizens. By placing inquiry ahead of identification, however, it repositions advocacy within the orbit of what Condit calls "linguistic materialism," a point that warrants some explanation. Because there is "a relationship between the material time stream and the 'histories' that are constructed about that time stream" (176), she argues, rhetoricians need to do "critical-historical work" (182) that differs from history, traditionally conceived as "a grand narrative that articulates a series of causes and effects," and from activism, traditionally conceived as "ideological" work "opposing the discourses of the present" (182). Though she agrees that such opposition is "essential," she also concedes that "a political activist is present-bound" by an agenda, vocabulary, and identification with an issue or movement. "Politically progressive academics, however, while linked to the activism of the moment, are also charged with larger time horizons and the formation (and/or formalization) of new ideologies" (183).

Condit makes an important and complementary distinction, then, between activists and politically progressive academics, one that I would like to echo here. We need activists to oppose injustice. But we need politically progressive academics to open up inquiries that are not present bound and that enable a temporary tethering of "community" across the

racial and class boundaries that divide us. While such inquires are not enough to generate social change in the strong sense of resource distribution or legislative victories, they can change the way we practice citizenship. We do much worse, I think, stewing in our silence.

Notes

[1] Although the student names have been changed, I have chosen pseudonyms that preserve their ethnic, racial, and gender identity.

[2] To see the publication online, go to http://www.iit.edu/~bronzeville-stories/

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David Coogan is an Assistant Professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University and the author of *Electronic Writing Centers: Computing the Field of Composition*. His most recent work on rhetoric, social change, and service learning has appeared in *College English* and *College Composition and Communication*. Currently he is working with John Ackerman on an edited collection, *The Public Work of Rhetoric.*