Ellen Cushman

The Rhetorician
as an Agent
of Social Change

I n his "Afterthoughts on Rhetoric and Public Discourse," S. Michael Halloran finds that "the efforts of citizens to shape the fate of their community... would surely have been of interest to American neo-classical rhetoricians of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries" (2). Unfortunately, he sees an "apparent lack of interest in such 'Public Discourse' among new rhetoricians of late twentieth-century English departments" (2). One way to increase our participation in public discourse is to bridge the university and community through activism. Given the role rhetoricians have historically played in the politics of their communities, I believe modern rhetoric and composition scholars can be agents of social change outside the university.

Some critical theorists believe that the primary means of affecting social change is to translate activism into liberatory classroom pedagogies. This paper seeks to address other ways in which we can affect social change, something more along the lines of civic participation. As Edward Schiappa suggests, "pedagogy that enacts cultural critique is important but it is not enough.... We should not allow ourselves the easy out of believing that being 'political' in the classroom is a substitute for our direct civic participation" (22). I agree. I hope here to suggest ways we can empower people in our communities, establish networks of reciprocity with them, and create solidarity with them. Using a self-reflexive rhetoric, I'll describe the limitations of my own role as a participant observer in a predominately Black (their term) neighborhood in a city in upstate New York. I hope to reveal a tentative model of civic participation in our neighborhoods

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which I believe illuminates some paradoxes in postmodern approaches to composition.*

Approaching the Community

One of the most pressing reasons why composition scholars may not work in the community has to do with deeply rooted sociological distances between the two. Many universities sit in isolated relation to the communities in which they're located—isolated socially and sometimes physically as well. Rensselaer, for example, where I'm a fourth year aPhiD candidate#, is isolated socially and physically from the community.

The Hudson borders Troy on the East, rolling hills on the West. Most of downtown developed along the river valley, while RPI expanded up one of these hills. People in the city generally call those associated with RPI "higher ups." Rensselaer students often call people in Troy "Troylets," "trash," or "low lifes." RPI was originally built closer to the city, beginning at the West edge of the valley, but for reasons too complicated to go into here, RPI expanded up the hill. The relationship between Rensselaer and

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* This paper is a multivoiced, self-reflexive look at our roles as rhetoricians. As such, I hope to turn our work as scholars inside out, upside down, back in upon itself. I've included many voices in this paper because this was the only way I seemed able to capture the range of reactions I've had to the theories and practices of critical pedagogues and cultural studies theorists—from initial enthusiasm to disillusionment to frustration and anger. And so I've organized this paper as a hall of mirrors. The central image is the argument that rhetoricians can be agents of social change outside the university and a brief explanation of how this plays out in research. To create this image, I use a narrative voice to tell a story of possibility. The footnotes with various markers are the next set of mirrors and reveal more background for my argument. In these footnotes, I use a self-critical voice hoping that we will pause for a brief moment to examine our discourse. The numbered endnotes include the theorists I find most useful in reflecting my argument. Here I use an academic voice in a conscious effort to work within the system. Finally, we have the appendices. In these I don't want to cite specific authors because the onus to consider the ramifications of using critical discourse remains on all of our shoulders. Yours and mine. With these asides, I want to point to trends in the discourse I've heard at conferences and read in the work of many composition scholars. I've appended these, first, because they reflect the main argument by revealing my initial frustration and, many times, anger, which prompt this paper; and, second, because they're written from this anger, I risk being dismissed as inflammatory, a risk I hope to reduce by making them an aside; third, these asides have significant personal value to me. They're the best translation of my street-tough, face-breaking, fight-picking voice that I can manage for an academic audience. Given this activist research, my white trash history, and being only one pay check away from returning to the streets, I'm never very far from that voice, that way of being, no matter how many books, computers, students, and teachers I sit in front of.

An aphid is a type of louse. So an aPHiD brings the "lo" together with "use." The plural of louse is lice. When I graduate, I'll have a License to create knowledge from the people I study. Do da. Do da.

Troy is best symbolized by the Approach, what used to be a monument of granite stairs, pillars, and decorative lights, but is now barely recognizable as a walkway.[1] (See Figure 1.)

The city gave the Approach to Rensselaer in 1907 as a sign of the mutually rewarding relationship between the two. Once an access way to the university on the hill, literally and figuratively, the stairway was pictured on many of the notebooks of students in the Troy City school district. Walk into any diner in the city and folks can remember the Approach pictured on their notebooks when they were growing up. Even in the late 1950s, students and city officials worked together to maintain this connection as part of a "civic betterment project." (See Figure 2.)

Unfortunately, the Approach fell into disrepair during the early 1970s as a result of disagreements between the city and university about who should have responsibility for maintenance. Now angry graffiti, missing stairs, and overgrowth symbolize the tattered relationship between the city and RPI. (See Figure 3.) Young fraternity boys are rumored to use the Approach for initiation during rush week, and certain ski club members have skied down the Approach as a testament to their ability and courage. While Troy natives look at the Approach in fury and disgust, the city and RPI continue to negotiate over its upkeep and hopeful repair.
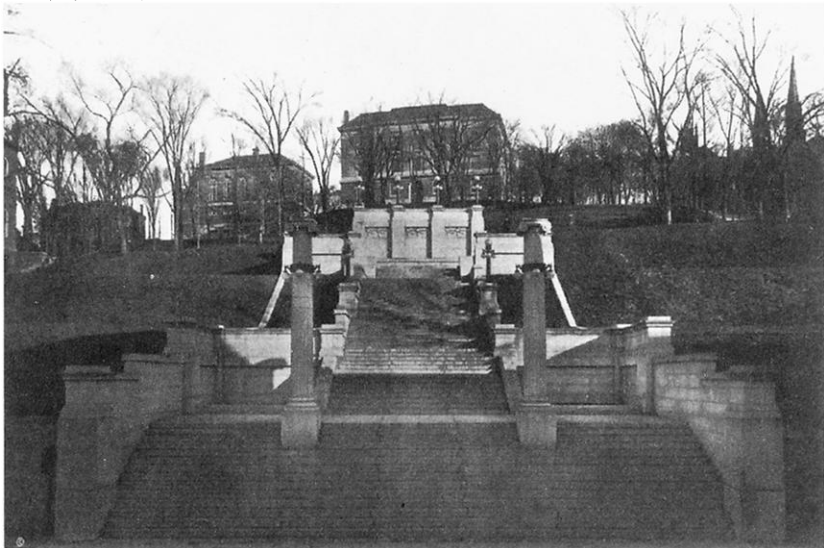

Figure 1: View of "The Hill" and the Approach in the early 1900s. RPI Archives.
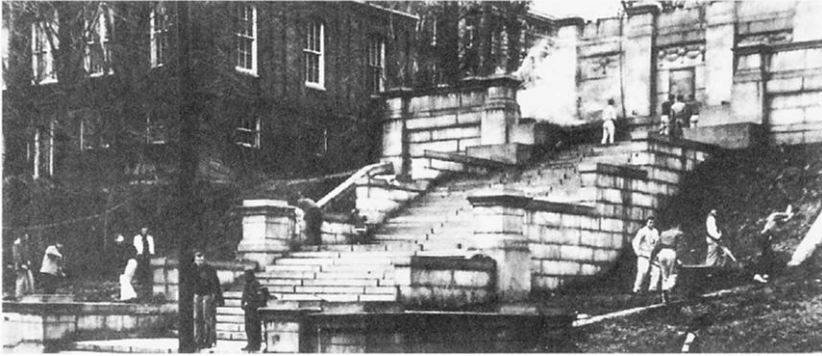
Figure 2: Rensselaer students clean up the Approach in 1959. RPI Archives.

I spend time describing this symbol of the relationship between the university and the city because I don't think this relationship is an isolated example of the sociological distance between the university and the community. It's precisely this distance that seems to be a primary factor in prohibiting scholars from Approaching people outside the university. Everyday, we reproduce this distance so long as a select few gain entrance to universities, so long as we differentiate between experts and novices,
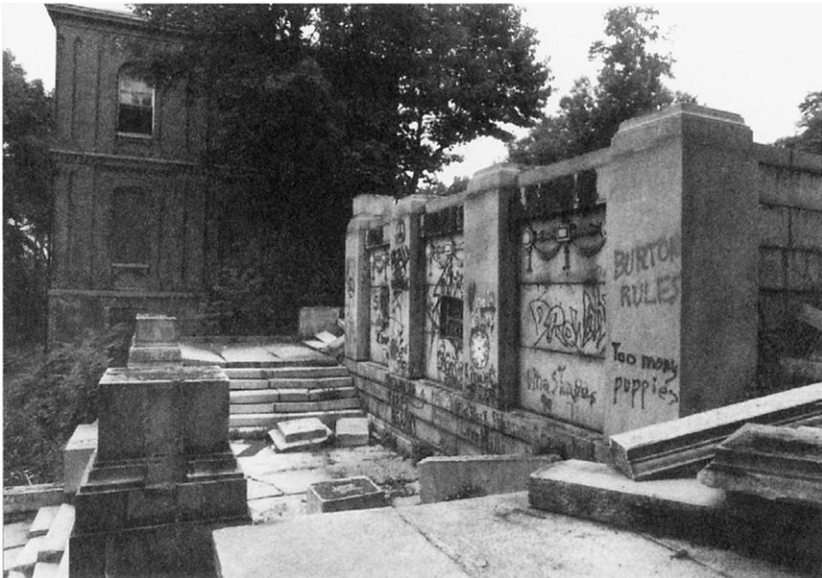

Figure 3: The Approach in 1995. Photo by Chris Boese.

and so long as we value certain types of knowledge we can capitalize on through specialization.[2] This history of professionalization might be one reason academics have so easily turned away from the democratic project that education serves to ensure—civic participation by well-rounded individuals.[3]

Malea Powell, an Eastern Miami and Shawnee Indian, suggests that the theorizing of academics necessitates a distance from the daily living of people outside academe, particularly those people we study. Although she's found "a location for healing in theory," she also knows these theories are used to "civilize unruly topics," with a similar assumption of manifest destiny that colonists use(d) to civilize unruly Native Americans. "Central to telling the 'American' story is the settlers' vision of the frontier, a frontier that is 'wilderness,' empty of all 'civilized' life." In order to colonize, the settlers denied the very existence of Turtle Island's original people. Powell sees that

> this denial, this un-seeing...characterizes our "American" tale. For the colo-
> nizers it was a necessary un-seeing; material Indian "bodies" were simply not
> seen...the mutilations, rapes, and murders that made up 'the discovery' and
> 'manifest destiny' were also simply not seen. Un-seeing Indians gave (and
> still gives) Euroamericans a critical distance from materiality and responsibil-
> ity, a displacement that is culturally valued and marked as "objectivity."

Scholars reproduce this colonizing ideology when we maintain a distance from people. In search of an area of interest, we look to stake our claim over a topic, or in Powell's words, "define a piece of 'unoccupied' scholarly territory...which will become our own scholarly homestead." If the scholarly territory happens to be occupied by other scholarly endeavors, our job demands that we show how these original scholars fail to use their territory well, thereby giving us manifest justification for removing their theories from the territory through expansion, co-option, or complete dismissal. In some fundamental ways, we shirk our civil responsibility and always already enact violence under the guise of objective distance, and the thin veil of 'creating' knowledge.

Powell (and I) "don't mean to disable scholarly work here." But I believe that in doing our scholarly work, we should take social responsibility for the people from and with whom we come to understand a topic. I'm echoing Freire who shows that when we theorize about the oppressed, we must do "authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about *reality*, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication" (64). Once we leave the classroom, we're again in ivory tower isolation, unless we actively seek our students in other contexts—particularly the community context.

   Activism begins with a commitment to breaking down the sociological
barriers between universities and communities. And if we see ourselves as
both civic participants and as preparing students for greater civic participa-
tion, then activism becomes a means to well defined end for Approaching
the community. Recent work by Bruce Herzberg reveals one model for
how rhetoricians can enter into the community. His thoughtful article on
"Community Service and Critical Teaching" shows how he manages to
link his writing courses with community agencies.

> The effort to reach into the composition class with a curriculum aimed at de-
> mocracy and social justice is an attempt to make schools function . . . as radi-
> cally democratic institutions, with the goal not only of making individual
> students more successful, but also of making better citizens, citizens in the
> strongest sense of those who take responsibility for communal welfare. (317)

I'm not asking for composition teachers to march into the homes, church-
es, community centers, and schools of their community. I'm not asking for
us to become social workers either. I am asking for a deeper consideration
of the civic purpose of our *positions* in the academy, of what we do with
our knowledge, for whom, and by what means. I am asking for a shift in
our critical focus away from our own navels, Madonna, and cereal boxes
to the ways in which we can begin to locate ourselves within the demo-
cratic process of everyday teaching and learning in our neighborhoods.
For the remainder of this paper, let me offer some brief considerations of
what such activism might ideally entail, as well as some practical limita-
tions of trying to live up to this ideal. For these considerations, I draw
upon my own activist research in a primarily African-American inner city.

Short Changed

Most current accounts of activism in cultural studies don't do justice to so-
cial change taking place in day-to-day interactions. I think activism can
lead to social change, but not when it's solely measured on the scale of col-
lective action, or sweeping social upheavals. (See the appendix on "Slip-
pery Discourse.") Rather, we need to take into our accounts of social
change the ways in which people use language and literacy to challenge
and alter the circumstances of daily life. In these particulars of daily living,
people can throw off the burdens placed upon them by someone else's
onerous behavior. In other words, social change can take place in daily in-
teractions when the regular flow of events is objectified, reflected upon,
and altered. Daily interactions follow regular patterns of behavior, what
sociologist Anthony Giddens terms "routinization." These interactions re-
sult from every individual re-enacting the social structures that underpin

behaviors. Giddens' notion of the "duality of structure" captures the ways in which individuals' behaviors manifest overarching social structures. When the routine flow of events is impeded or upset, we have an example of deroutinization—of what can be the first steps to social change on micro-levels of interaction. I've found that people disrupt the status quo of their lives with language and literacy and that the researcher, when invited to do so, can contribute resources to this end.

For instance, Raejone, a 24-year-old mother of two, applied to a local university. As she composed her application essay, I offered some tutoring and access to Rensselaer computers. This was the first time she had applied to college. In another example, Lucy Cadens moved to a safer, suburban apartment complex. With my (and others') letters of recommendation, she obtained decent housing that accepts her Section 8. To facilitate the process of transferring her social services from one county to another, she asked me to complete a letter of certification which stated how many children she has in her new apartment. This is the first time Lucy has lived outside of the inner city. These precedents mark the very places where people deroutinize the status quo of wider society, together, during activist research.[4] Over the course of two and a half years of research, these people and I have worked together during numerous literacy events to create possibilities, the promising, if minute, differences in opportunity: together we've written resumes, job applications, college applications, and dialogic journals; when asked to do so, I've written recommendations to landlords, courts, potential employers, admissions counselors, and DSS representatives; one teen and I codirected a literacy program that allowed six children to read and write about issues important to them and that united resources from Rensselaer, Russell Sage College, the public library, and two philanthropic organizations. Since together we unite resources and grease the mechanisms of wider society institutions, all of these literacy acts carve possibilities from the routine ways these institutions, agencies, courts, and universities have historically worked in constraining ways.

I need to emphasize the difference between missionary activism, which introduces certain literacies to promote an ideology, and scholarly activism, which facilitates the literate activities that *already* take place in the community. For example, the Cadens' household had become too crowded with extended family. Lucy's daughter, Raejone, and her two children decided to seek housing from the philanthropic organization that rented to Raejone's mother. This agency had many units available and a short waiting list, but as the months passed, Raejone realized that her name never moved up the list. Her sisters also applied for housing but encountered similar foot dragging. Raejone found housing through a private landlord and then wrote a letter to this housing agency. In it she protested the inad-

equate treatment she received. Raejone and the directors of this housing program met to discuss the letter, and since then, Raejone's sisters have been offered housing by this agency. Raejone's letter caused the people who were simply reproducing their typical behavior to pause and consider the impact of their actions. In effect, the people in this housing program have altered the ways in which they treat Raejone and her family. Raejone, without any of my assistance, potently enacts her agency in order to challenge the routine foot dragging she faced.

Often this type of social change would be overlooked or underestimated with the emancipatory theories we currently use. Those who choose to say resistance only counts when it takes the form of overt and collective political action might describe us as using nothing more than coping devices with this literacy. Choosing to see this interaction in isolation, they may be correct; however, Scott reminds us that thousands of such "'petty' acts of resistance have dramatic economical and political effects" (*Domination* 192). These daily verbal and literate interactions mark the very places where composition teachers can begin to look for the impact of our critical pedagogy and activism, both in the classroom and when we approach the community.[5]

Red Robin Hoods

If we view social change at a micro level of interaction, we can begin to see where activism fits into the particulars of daily living. Activism means accepting a civic duty to empower people with our positions, a type of leftist stealing from the rich to give to the poor. To empower, as I use it, means: (a) to enable someone to achieve a goal by providing resources for them; (b) to facilitate actions—particularly those associated with language and literacy; (c) to lend our power or status to forward people's achievement. Often we are in a position to provide the luxuries of literacy for people. Since we're surrounded with the tools for literacy all day long, we often take for granted the luxury of the time and space needed for our literacy events. We schedule our work days around papers we read and write; our research is often carried out in libraries—clean, well lit, with cubicles and desks to use as we silently mine books for information;❖ and we return to our homes or offices to trace out an idea with pen and paper or at the keyboard. Our time is devoted to reading and writing with spaces and institutional resources often provided for us. But when we approach the community, often we will be forced "to recall the material conditions of writing," to remember that "we do confront such complex material questions as how to provide equality of access to computers for word processing" (Gere 87).

❖ We mine data in our scholarly homeplots looking for a gem of an idea others will value.

The reading and writing used for individual development in many communities is a valued, scarce, and difficult endeavor. We may say to ourselves that reading and writing is more important than some daily worries, such as cleaning, taking care of children and grandparents, and cooking, but often one of the primary ways people build a good name for themselves outside of work is to be solid parents, providers, doers. Mike Rose reminds us in *Lives on the Boundary* as he describes Lucia, a returning student and single mother, and notes "how many pieces had to fall in place each day for her to be a student. . . . Only if those pieces dropped in smooth alignment could her full attention shift to" the challenges of literacy for her own development (185). In *All Our Kin*, Carol Stack also describes similar domestic demands which must take priority over time for oneself in order for people to maintain their social networks of reciprocity. In other words, before people can devote their time to reading and writing to improve themselves, their social and family duties must be in place. Many women in the neighborhood in which I am immersed say they "wish there were more than 24 hours in a day," or they qualify their literate goals with, "if I had time, I could study that driver's manual." Yet, for a researcher, seeing the need for time is only half of the equation; the other half is doing something about those needs.

Empowering people in part enables them to achieve a goal by providing resources for them. Since it's difficult for many of these women to clear time alone while they're at home, we often schedule one or two hours to be together during the week when they know they won't be missed. We've spent time in places where we have many literate resources at our disposal including bookstores, libraries, my apartment (not far from this neighborhood), as well as the Rensselaer computer labs and Writing Center. During these times we've cleared together, we've studied driver's manuals, discussed books, gone through the college application process, as well as worked on papers, resumes and letters they wanted to write. Because we have worked together, these people who want time away from the neighborhood have achieved their literate goals.

Empowerment also happens when we facilitate people's oral and literate language use as well as lend our status for their achievement. The people in this neighborhood recognize the prestige of the language resources and social status I bring from Rensselaer and ask for assistance in a number of their language use activities.[+] One woman had just received an eviction notice and asked me to "help [her] get a new place." She asked if we could practice mock conversations she might have with landlords over the phone. She thought this practice would "help [her] sound respectable, you

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[+] In addition to language resources, I make available many of my material resources: clothes, small amounts of money, food, and rides to the doctor, stores, and DSS offices.

know, white." As we practiced in her dining room, she wrote what we said on the back of a Chinese take-out menu for future reference. Once she set appointments to see an apartment, she contacted me so we could view the apartments together because "having you with me will make me seem respectable, you being from RPI and all." She differentiates between the social languages we speak and she wants to practice these languages with me.[6] She also identifies one way she can use my position for her own ends. She eventually got an apartment and thanked me for what she saw as my contribution. (See the appendix on "False Consciousness.") I've found that the luxury of literacy can easily be transferred from the university to our neighborhoods when we expand the scope of our scholarly activities to include activism. While empowerment may seem one sided, as though the scholar has a long arm of emancipating power, the people in communities can empower us through reciprocity.

Much Obliged

The terms governing the give-and-take (reciprocity) of involvement in the community need to be openly and consciously negotiated by everyone participating in activist research. As Bourdieu terms it, reciprocity describes a gift-giving and receiving behavior which can produce a mode of domination if the gift is not returned. "A gift that is not returned can become a debt, a lasting obligation" (126). Depending on the terms of the exchange, this obligation can either be in the form of a monetary debt, which imposes "overtly economic obligations by the usurer," or, in the form of an ethical debt, which produces "moral obligations and emotional attachments created and maintained by the generous gift, in short, overt violence or symbolic violence" (126). Reciprocity in exchange networks quickly produces power relations where the likelihood of oppression depends upon the terms of the giving and receiving.

   While Bourdieu depicts reciprocity networks by studying the bonds maintained in relations between kin-people and tribal chiefs, this notion of reciprocity applies to the ways in which we enter into the community. With an idea of how exchanges create and maintain oppressive structures, activists can pay conscious attention to the power structures produced and maintained during their interactions with others outside of the university. Reciprocity includes an open and conscious negotiation of the power structures reproduced during the give-and-take interactions of the people involved on both sides of the relationship. A theory of reciprocity, then, frames this activist agenda with a self-critical, conscious navigation of this intervention.

   Herzberg's work exemplifies reciprocity well when interpreted in terms of the give-and-take relationship between the researcher and community.

Through a "service-learning program," students at Bentley became adult literacy tutors at a shelter in Boston and wrote about their experiences in Herzberg's composition classroom. At the outset, the rules were established for what types of information could be exchanged between the tutor and learners. The students "were not allowed (by the wise rules of the shelter and good sense) to quiz their learners on their personal lives and histories" (315). Before these tutorial sessions began, the boundaries for exchange of information were set. Students tutored, wrote, and received college credit; Herzberg gave his time and energy, which eventually earned him a spot in this journal; and although this article does not make clear what the people in the shelter received and gave from this involvement, he indicates "the tutoring, as best [as they] could determine, appeared to be productive for the learners at the shelter" (316). From his work, we begin to see how bridging the university and community establishes give-and-take relationships that must be openly and carefully navigated.

It may seem that the activist research I described in the previous section is one-sided, that I may sound like a self-aggrandizing liberator of oppressed masses. But this just isn't the case, since, these people empower me in many ways. Referring back to my original definition of empowerment, they've enabled me to achieve a primary goal in my life: getting my PhD. They've let me photocopy their letters, personal journals, essays, and applications. They've granted me interviews and allowed me to listen to their interactions with social workers, admissions counselors, and DSS representatives. They've told me stories and given me the history of this area through their eyes. They've fed me, included me in their family gatherings for birthdays and holidays, and have invited me to their parties and cook outs. They've read my papers and made suggestions; they listened to my theories and challenged them when I was off mark. (See the appendix on "In Ivory Towers, We Overlook.") As I write my dissertation, they add, clarify and question. In some very important ways, we collaborate in this research. In fact, the two women whose writing I refer to most frequently in this article, signed a release form so that you may read about them today. To quote from the *CCC* "consent-to-reprint" forms, Raejone and Lucy understood that they "will receive no compensation" for their work and that they "assign publishing rights for the contribution to NCTE, including all copyrights." They have given me the right to represent them to you and have facilitated my work in doing so. They've also lent me their status. They've legitimized my presence in their neighborhood, in masque, and in some institutions simply by associating with me. Through reciprocity, they've enabled me to come closer to achieving my goal everyday; they've facilitated my actions; and they've lent me their status.

The Access in Praxis

Often we don't have to look far to find access routes to people outside of the university. Any kind of identification we may have with people in our communities, to some extent, acts as a point of commonality where our perspectives overlap, despite our different positions. These points of convergence, I think, come closest to Freire's notion of solidarity. Solidarity manifests itself when there are common threads of identity between the student and teacher. To achieve empowerment through critical consciousness, the teacher "must be a partner of the students in his relations with them" (62). A partnership connotes people working together toward common goals. Freire finds "one must seek to live with others in solidarity... [and] solidarity requires true communication" (63). I believe that access to people with whom we identify is the initial building block for the solidarity and communication needed in activism.

Many access routes into the community have been established by philanthropic organizations, churches, community centers, and businesses. Before an access route is chosen, though, significant research needs to be done to see how the community developed, what types of contributions are needed, and whether or not there's precedent for the work proposed. After I spoke with representatives in many philanthropic and social service agencies, I volunteered in a bridge program between Rensselaer and a community center. Once there, I proposed a summer literacy program, but when this was over, I soon realized that I needed to reposition myself in the community. When I stopped volunteering, the women in this community found it easier to identify with me as a person and not as an organizational member.

Although I'm white, the women in this neighborhood and I identify with each other in many ways: we're no strangers to welfare offices, cockroaches, and empty refrigerators. We've held our chins out and heads up when we haven't had enough food stamps at the check out line. We've made poor (and good) choices in men and have purple and pink scars to prove it. We know enough to take out our earrings before we fight. We know abuses and disorders and the anonymous places people turn to for them. Since many of these people came from the Carolinas, and since my great-great-grand parents were in the Trail of Tears, we know why, on a crisp January day, a cardinal in a pine tree gives us hope.

Once we locate an access route into the community, we can begin the long process of self disclosure and listening from which we can begin to identify with each other. For Freire, communication is the main way to achieve this identification: "Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges:

teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer the-one-who-teaches, but one who himself is taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach" (67). Through communication, the exchange of questioning and asserting, we come to identify with each other and challenge the bases for our differences.

While this type of dialogue can take place in the classroom, the very power structure of the university makes it difficult to establish and maintain dialogue and solidarity. There's only so much we can get to know about our students within the sociological confines of the academic composition classroom. (See the Appendix on "Freired Not.") Yet when we approach the community, we maneuver around the sociological obstacles that hinder us in the classroom from communicating with our students in ways that show our identification with them. Said another way, activism starts with some kind of identification with people outside of the university, an identification that often can flourish in a context where both the scholar and people together assess and redraw lines of power structures between them.

No Mother Teresas Here

With the initial components of activism roughed out this way, I need to provide some important caveats. Let me show a few of the limitations of this kind of praxis with reference to shortcomings and mishaps in my own ethnographic fieldwork. My first concern in folding open activism this way is that these principles will be read as altruistic, when in my experience activism establishes an interdependency. Activism can't be altruistic because we have to be in a position to participate in our communities. The very same position as scholar which distances us from the community also invests us with resources we can make available to others. And we need these luxuries in order to be stable enough to give our time, knowledge, and resources. This means we must work very hard in the academy with the support of our community in order to garner the status and resources that we then return to the community.

I don't mean to simplify the process of gaining luxury here because I recognize that becoming an agent of social change in our neighborhoods requires time and energy. As a funded graduate student, I'm particularly fortunate to have the time and money to do this activist research. My teaching assistantship requires an average of twenty hours of work per week, and since I'm through with course work, I'm only on campus when I'm teaching, writing on the computers, or researching in the library. While I know my professors have 3/2 and 3/3 course loads, I've heard of

other professors who have 5/5 course loads and hundreds of students ev-
ery semester.[7] Yet, at the risk of sounding pollyannic, we've already seen
precedents for the type of scholarly civic participation I suggest. Perhaps
through the reciprocity of activism, we might fold together our scholarly
and civic duties.

Since the relationship established in activism centers upon reciprocity,
an interdependency emerges. One of the ways in which we've maintained
a mutually empowering relationship is through open and careful naviga-
tion of the reciprocity we've established. While this reciprocity may sound
easy to maintain, many times requests have to be turned down. I've asked
to record certain people and have been refused; I've also asked for exam-
ples of certain types of writing people didn't feel comfortable giving me, so
I went without. Likewise, one person asked me to co-sign on a car loan
(which I couldn't); and another person asked me to sign over any royalties
I receive from a possible book to the families on the block (which I'm
still considering). Everyone in this research realizes what we stand to gain
from the work, and reciprocity helps prevent the work from becoming
altruistic.

If we ignore the give-and-take established in activist research and in-
stead choose to paint ourselves in the bright colors of benevolent libera-
tors, we risk becoming what Macedo so delicately terms "literacy and
poverty pimps" (xv). When we adopt a fashionable theory of emancipa-
tory pedagogy and activism without considering the structural constraints
imposed by reciprocity, we capitalize on other's daily living without giving
any of these benefits in return. But here's the paradox—we need to make
activism part of our research and teaching, so that we can make a living in
the university. How else will we be able to give in equal amount to what
we take?

Accessive Force

The degree to which we gain entrance into the daily lives of people outside
the university in some measure depends upon who we are. The bound-
aries of our access must be negotiated with the people. Often, leftist posing
assumes a here-I-am-to-save-the-day air, takes for granted immediate and
complete entrance into a community, presumes an undeniably forceful
presence. In my own work, I've overstepped the boundaries of my access
working under similar assumptions. Six months into this research on a
summer afternoon, I joined a large group of teens and adults playing
cards, sipping beer, and talking on a front stoop. I was dealt into a game of
21 and listened to gossip and news. Lucy Cadens had a boyfriend (Antho-
ny) who was seated in one of the folding chairs at the end of the stoop.

Lucy had been gone for a few minutes, and he and I chatted until it was my turn to deal.

Later that day, Lucy called me away from the stoop and asked, "You want to tell me about Anthony?" I thought she was referring to a complaint a parent made to the center staff about him, and told her I wasn't at liberty to talk about it. She looked confused and asked me if I was talking to him that day. I told her of what I thought was an innocent conversation about gambling in Atlantic city. "They told me he was fishing with you," she said with her hands on her hips. I was shocked; what I thought was a simple conversation was actually him flirting with me. I told Lucy that I would keep a much safer distance from him and asked if she thought I should make that a unilateral decision about interacting with men in the neighborhood. She said I should be careful about who I talked to and about what, but that I could be polite to them. Since then, I've negotiated this boundary much more carefully and have gathered the majority of my notes from the children and women of the neighborhood. In this way, the access I presumed I had was fundamentally limited along gender lines. The lines of access must be charted, recharted, and respected in activist research. I had overstepped a boundary, albeit unintentionally, and realized my liberal presumption of unlimited access was pompous and shortsighted.

The Best Laid Approaches

Civic participation requires careful understandings of how our position will work, or not, within the given organizations of people. As mentioned earlier, I originally gained access to this neighborhood as a literacy volunteer and researcher through a bridge program between Rensselaer and the neighborhood center located in the heart of this community. As a volunteer, the social workers expected that I follow the same rules of conduct that they were institutionally bound to follow. However, I soon realized that the roles of researcher and volunteer contradict each other in important ways.

As a volunteer, a team player, I was expected to tell the social workers any details I might be privy to which concerned the private lives of the people in this neighborhood. I often visited the homes and sat on the stoops with people when the social workers were bound to stay in the center—their liability insurance did not cover them if something happened to them outside the center. As a researcher, though, I needed to walk between both worlds, the home and community center, but I was bound to the ethics of participant observation which dictate I can not reveal information about my informants. Unfortunately, the center staff felt threatened by my peculiar position and worried that I would jeopardize their

standing within the community with the information I had about the workings of their institution. As a result, they asked me to discontinue my volunteer work with them.

When we first consider bridging with communities, especially if we hope to do research at the same time, we must chart the internal workings of the institutions in order to see the ways we might, or might not, fit in. I initially believed I could simply volunteer and do research—"surely people will welcome the time and resources I offer." Here I was guilty of leftist posing disguised as philanthropy. Because I assumed this, I didn't negotiate my role within this organization well at all.

Even with these limitations, we can begin to participate in our communities despite (to spite) the sociological distances we must cross. Cultural studies models of empowerment and critical pedagogues are derelict in their civic duties by not including an expanded version of activism. Through activism, we've taken the first, tentative steps toward social change outside of the social confines of the university classroom. Finally, we not only fill a civic responsibility with activism, but also inform our teaching and theories with the perspectives of people outside the university. We begin to see just how deficient our estimations of our students are when we immerse ourselves and contribute to their everyday literacy and hidden belief systems.

The roads into the communities aren't paved with yellow bricks and sometimes may seem unapproachable, but access can generally be gained with observation and informal interviews to see who is already in the neighborhood and how they got there. Along the way relationships need to be navigated openly and consciously with close attention paid to boundaries and limitations in our access and intervention. Of course, I'm ignoring one potential means of access into the community—our students. But then, this assumes that we have solid enough relations with them to be able to follow them beyond the moat surrounding the ivory tower.

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Appendices

Slippery Discourse

Many researchers believe that they can promote *social change* and *empower* students through critical literacy and emancipatory pedagogy. Yet we often hear the terms *social change* and *empowerment* used as though the nature of their outcomes is clearly established and reflected upon. This slippery discourse leads us to believe that we're all after the same ends: "enfranchising outsiders," having "social impact," creating a more "just society," offering a "liberating ideology," honing students' "awareness and critical consciousness," challenging "the oppressive system," "encouraging resistance," and

of course, "interrogating dominate hegemony."† Just how these end prod-
ucts of critical pedagogy lead to social change and empowerment isn't clear
to me from these discussions. In fact, some scholars make no distinctions
between social *change* and *empowerment*, as though to empower is to liber-
ate, and to liberate is to produce social change.[8] Underpinning this slippery
discourse is an equally slick assumption—*social change* and *empowerment*
lead to some kind of collective action or resistance involving the masses of
people we teach.[9] When we view the impact of critical pedagogy from
these grand levels, though, we miss the particular ways in which our teach-
ing and research might contribute to students' abilities to take up their civic
responsibilities once they leave our classrooms. We need a theory of social
change and empowerment that captures the complex ways power is nego-
tiated at micro levels of interaction between people, which would allow us
to better characterize the impact of our work. With such a theory, we're
less likely to paint ourselves as great "liberators of oppressed masses."

False Consciousness

Many critical theorists portray themselves as brokers of emancipatory
power, a stance that garners them status at the expense of students. One
way to make a position for themselves in the academy is to diagnose their
students as having "false consciousness." Once labeled as having "false
consciousness," students can be easily dismissed and diminished by critical
theory.[10] Yet, the many scholars who do immerse themselves into the dai-
ly living of people find, predictably, hidden ideologies—belief systems that
contain numerous, clever ways to identify and criticize onerous behav-
ior.[11] In some fundamental sense, the discursive posturing we so frequent-
ly hear would not be able to legitimize itself, if it didn't diminish others in
its wake. The label of false consciousness, then, reveals more about the
speaker's limited access to students and communities, than it reveals about
the level of people's critical abilities. If cultural studies theorists were to
visit the homes and streets of the people attending their classes, they
would likely hear critiques of the dominating sociological forces.[12] Therein
we see the fundamental problem in building our models of cultural stud-
ies: we're sociologically distanced from the cultures we study.

In Ivory Towers, We Overlook

When we fail to consider the perspectives of people outside of the academy,
we overlook valuable contributions to our theory building. Without a prax-

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† These trends in discourse I culled from many of the collected essays in *Composition and Resis-
tance*. Since these discourses often make one think of saviors, the footnote marker seems par-
ticularly apt.

is that moves between community and university, we risk not only under-
estimating our students' pre-existing critical consciousness, but we also risk
reproducing the hegemonic barriers separating the university from the
community. That is, we become guilty of applying our theories from the so-
ciological "top-down," instead of informing our theories from the "bottom-
up." In fact, it appears many value the idea more than the people, a value
that bolsters the sociological distance of the university from the communi-
ty. I've even read arguments *supporting* the social isolation of theorists in
the academy from people in communities. In other words, we exclude
many of the people we're trying to empower for the sake of positing (what
we sure as hell hope will be) liberating ideas. The flaw in this logic seems so
obvious: How can we study ideologies, hegemonies, power structures, and
the effects of discursive practices when we overlook community discursive
dispositions—the place where these language practices are first inculcated,
generated and consequently reproduced in the social habitus?[13] Thus,
many postmodern theorists remain tucked within their libraries and don't
engage the very people they hope to help. They will send their theories
down to the people and engage each other in postmodern conversations
(over pomo tea perhaps) in their postmodern universities.

Freired Not

When we begin to turn cultural studies in on itself in a self-reflexive man-
ner, we see its limiting assumptions and paradoxical stances as it's applied
to composition studies. And this is indeed a shame, because the political
and sociological theories it employs are very useful in expanding our roles
as rhetoricians to include more perspectives from the margins. In the
opening of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire evaluates the oppressors in soci-
ety: "To affirm that men are persons and persons should be free, and yet,
to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce" (35).
What he means by tangible is left up to interpretation; I suggest he means
activism.[14] If we let *tangible* be synonymous with activism, then to what
extent is promoting critical consciousness in our classrooms "activist?" My
sense is that we're not doing enough because we're acting within the role
of the teacher that has been perpetuated by the institution, and thus keeps
us from breaking down the barriers between the university and communi-
ty. In fact, many critical pedagogues have betrayed their activist agenda in
their classrooms by characterizing their students as "dull," "numb,"
"dumbly silent," "unreflective," "yearning" and/or "resentful."[∞] They
place themselves in the oppressive position by relegating students to the

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[∞]As found in the popular collection of essays, *Contending with Words*.

category of the "unfortunates." Pedagogues are only two letters shy of becoming demagogues. About these characterizations, Freire might say: "No pedagogy that is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates" (39). What these researchers fail to remember is that the students they teach are in a prime position for critical reflection precisely because they are disenfranchised: "Who are better prepared," Freire asks, "than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society?" (29).

Notes

1. While this idea of the physical surroundings having significance isn't novel, it is often overlooked as a tool to critique our own context, the university setting. Bakhtin, for example, finds that "everything ideological possesses semiotic value" (929). In other words, "any physical body may be perceived as an image. . . . Any such artistic-symbol image to which a particular physical object gives rise is already an ideological product. The physical object is converted into a sign" (928). This allows us to critique how even the construction and setting of the Approach can take on significance. Thus, "a sign does not simply exist as a part of a reality—it reflects and refracts another reality" (929). The stairway is a sign of the connection between the city and university, a connection that needs maintenance.

2. Cheryl Geisler offers a cogent summary of these ideas in the second chapter of her recent book on expertise in the academy. Further, Bowles and Gintis present a Marxist analysis of the ways in which schooling serves to perpetuate the class hierarchies necessary for modern capitalism to flourish.

3. Mike Rose's latest work reveals the rich and complicated ways in which primary and secondary school teachers still move toward this democratic principal. His book challenges the country's impoverished discourse used to describe education, and takes steps toward envisioning a discourse of possibility centered on a fundamental belief in the strong ties between education and democracy.

4. Activist research expands upon notions of *praxis*. Originally developed by Aristotle, praxis resembles "phronesis, action adhering to certain ideal standards of good (ethical) or effective (political) behavior" (Warry 157). Marx embellished this political agenda for

participation in his "Eleventh Thesis," and some applied anthropologists have since adopted praxis as a term describing, loosely, ethical action in the research paradigm geared toward social change. For example, Johannsen brings postmodern critiques to ethnography and finds that research as praxis demands that we actively participate in the community under study. While expanding the participant side of social science research is necessary in order to achieve praxis, examinations of praxis in social sciences are for the most part "wholly theoretical and with only occasional reference to methodological or pragmatic concerns associated with planned change, intervention, or action research" (Warry 156). Even though applied anthropology, a subfield of anthropology, provides theoretical models for how praxis enters into the research paradigm (see Lather), many scholars still need to do the work of intervention at the community level.

5. Some may question the potency of such activism and the extent to which these literacy events really did challenge the status quo. In his classic social scientific study entitled *Black Families in White America*, Andrew Billingsley depicts some of the historically rooted everyday struggles of African-Americans in achieving social and geographic mobility. Education "is a most reliable index and a potent means of gaining social mobility and family stability in our society. The absence of systematic training and education during slavery and reconstruction depressed the social structure of the Negro people most, just as the presence of education in small and scattered doses proved such a powerful source of achievement" (79). Raejone's application essay for college suggests one way we worked against this historically rooted absence of ed-

ucation that Billingsley mentions in an effort
to create the presence of higher education in
her family. Similarly, the literacy which con-
tributed to Lucy's relocation to a suburban
area loosens "the tight white noose around
the central cities [that] has kept Negro fami-
lies from being able to penetrate suburbia in
any appreciable numbers" (74).

6. Different types of discourses constitute
different contexts, an idea Bakhtin described
well as the difference between "everyday
genre" ("what ordinary people live, and their
means for communicating with each other)"
(*Dialogic* 428) and "social languages" ("the dis-
course peculiar to a specific system of society
(professional, age group, etc.)" (430). Thus,
"heteroglossia" allows us to understand how
"language is stratified, not only into linguistic
dialects . . . but also—and for us this is the es-
sential point—into languages that are socio-
ideological: languages of social groups" (272).

7. I found Pauline Uchmanowicz' recent
article particularly disturbing. She describes
her "dog years" as a part-time college writing
instructor at two institutions where she
teaches "between twelve and sixteen sched-
uled classes per week" and is paid "a little
over half the salary of a full-time teacher for
teaching double the course load" (427). Add
to this burden her commute of five hundred
miles every week and lack of job security,
and I begin to worry that the luxury needed
for activism is out of reach for many compo-
sition teachers.

8. Jennifer Gore insightfully critiques
"some shortcomings in the construction of
'empowerment' by critical and feminist edu-
cational discourses which create problems in-
ternal to their discourses" (54). For example,
she identifies how the agency of empower-
ment stems from the teacher, while the sub-
ject of empowerment is usually the student.
As the center of activity in these discourses,
the teacher is more important than the stu-
dents—a practice that contradicts the theo-
retical emphasis on the student.

9. I think many of us work so closely from
Freire's model of pedagogy we believe the
impact his literacy projects have will be in
equal kind and type to the impact our classes
may have. However, Freire cautions "it is im-
possible to export pedagogical practices with-
out re-inventing them. Please, tell your
fellow American educators not to import me.
Ask them to recreate and rewrite my ideas"
(Macedo xiv).

10. James Scott, a political scientist,
makes a convincing argument against the la-
bel of "false consciousness." His ethnographic
fieldwork in Malaysia depicts not only the
social forces which daily influence Malay
peasants, but also reveals their unseen defi-
ance and hidden ideology used to challenge
these forces. He differentiates between those
public and private behaviors that relate to
power struggles. The peasants appear to cor-
dially accept the authority of landlords in
their public encounters with them; however,
they actually fought this oppressive ideology
in private spheres. This resistance Scott terms
as the difference between "public and hidden
transcripts," and reveals how these peasants
have devised a number of ways to challenge
their subordination. These forms of often
"low profile, undisclosed resistance" create
the infrapolitics of larger society (198), but
also suggest the limitation of the notion of
false consciousness. Since most researchers
and teachers aren't privy to the hidden ideol-
ogies of their informants/students, we miss
the ways in which resistance and critical con-
sciousness are constructed in subtle, often
unnoticed ways.

11. For example, Keith Basso found that
Western Apache's have clever, elaborate sys-
tems of mocking "the Whiteman." Luis Moll
immersed himself in a Mexican-American
community in Tucson, Arizona, and charac-
terized complex systems of knowledge and
strategies shared by households in order to
"enhance survival within harsh social condi-
tions" (225). Carol Stack in *All Our Kin* found
African-Americans devised many strategies
to undermine the welfare institution's influ-
ence in their fund allocation, including with-
holding information, foot dragging, and
misrepresenting census data. Perhaps with
more access to their students' communities,
critical scholars would not be so quick in
their dismissal of their students' critical abili-
ties.

12. Fundamental to activism, I believe, is
not only a basic trust in the potential and
abilities of people, but also a basic mistrust of
assessments that diminish and dismiss others.
Brian Fay, a philosopher of social science, de-
scribes the ontological values of critical social
science this way: "An active creature . . . is in-
telligent, curious, reflective, and willful"
(50). All people have these qualities regard-
less of their socio-cultural circumstances. Ac-
tivism has roots in a genuine care and respect

for all people. Anything short of this and our work quickly takes on a paternalistic, patronizing, and ingenuine flavor.

13. Pierre Bourdieu's sociological model of the *habitus* describes dispositions as patterns of behavior, such as language behaviors, which then combine to make the "acquired system of generative schemes, the habitus" (54).

14. As Giroux points out, "though Freire provides the broad theoretical framework needed to help bridge the gaps that plague radical education in North America, his analysis in key places warrants further substantiation and depth" (136). For the sake of this argument, I believe that in North America,

teaching is different from activism. Teaching is institutionalized because a certain social status is constructed around the knowledge used in this role (see Berger and Luckmann). Yet, activism in the politics of the community is not institutionalized, per se, rather, it's a civic duty that all people can potentially fulfill without needing specialized knowledge related to schooling (Geisler; Bowles and Gintis). So activism is more closely related to civic duty and teaching related to an institution. I see these two activities on the same continuum of the democratic process, as potentially mutually informative, but not interchangeable projects of democracy.

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