

The 2012 NCTE Presidential Address: Literacy, Rhetoric, Education, Democracy

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The following is the text of Keith Gilyard's presidential address, delivered at the NCTE Annual Convention in Las Vegas, Nevada, on November 18, 2012.

Listen, baby. Mover love you. Mover not dumb. Listen baby: ABCDEFGHIJKLM-
NOPQRSTUVWXYZ. That's the alphabet. Twenty-six letters in all. Them letters make
up words. Them words everything. (Sapphire, 1996/1997, 66)

These are insights that the character Precious Jones, in the novel *Push*, records in her notebook. Writing to Abdul, her yet-to-be-born son, she indelibly links print literacy to possibility. The written word will not solve all of the problems in her life. She is only sixteen, yet Abdul will be the second child she bears after being repeatedly raped by her father. Moreover, she is HIV positive (fortunately her son and daughter are not), and though having sat in classrooms for years, she scores barely above a 2.0 reading level on the Tests for Adult Basic Education (TABE). Despite her troubles, Precious understands that literacy affords her a fuller grasp of humanity and suggests the potential for more meaningful social participation. Literacy guarantees no specific life, but it opens up windows. Them words everything.

Precious, then, is not a hopeless figure, though she is a tragic one, as Sapphire's purple prose—Alice Walker style, not flowery embellishment—makes clear. She is tragic in the sense that Hamlet is. In other words, when she finally recognizes the value of agency, she will be severely constrained in her attempts to express any. Hamlet would have proven most royal had he been put on, or so Fortinbras contends (*Hamlet*, act 5, sc. 2). The same, if granted the chance, would be true of Precious. She, in fact, is the more noble character. Black, poor, female, brutalized, and stricken with disease, she has been trying to transcend more slings and arrows than our beleaguered prince of Denmark could have imagined. To be or not to be ain't the question for her. In her mind, even against the horror, she gon be. As she expresses the matter shortly after Abdul's birth, when she is fleeing home and

seeking placement in a halfway house, “What I gonna be, queen of babies? No, I gonna be queen of those ABCs—readin’ ‘n writin’. I not gonna give Abdul up and I is gonna get Little Mongo back one day, maybe” (75).

We should make special note of the “maybe,” the qualifying statement that nods seriously to her material conditions. Alas, her triumph, whatever it turns out to be, will not be total. Again, we do not want to grow too tender-minded in thinking about what her education will enable. Nonetheless, if not master of her circumstances, Precious does emerge victorious over *a* circumstance; that is, she achieves a sophisticated purpose. What greater satisfaction is there than to ponder how to become the most productive bridge between past and future and construct that path as a legacy for ensuing generations? Precious pursues this work tirelessly—attending double sessions at the Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One program, writing commentary and poems, reading constantly to Abdul. By way of this process, with the worst barriers out of her way, she makes what her teacher describes as a quantum leap forward in literacy. Having won the struggle for purpose, she sets as good a course as she can manage for Abdul, who fortunately is a healthy baby with a better parent and brighter prospects than Precious has ever had. Maybe he can work his way up to becoming some sort of prince.

Them words everything. This is the expression of the necessary encounter with language, the rallying cry I adopt as a teacher. The basic task, as I see it, is to foster the reception and production of poems, stories, essays, articles, dramas, and language-based, multimedia compositions and then to help sharpen such consumption and output so that they truly deepen perspective and contribute genuinely to the great reservoir of thinking from which we drink. This is the promise of democratic education, which is the catalyst to enable our nation to make the most of its collective life, something it cannot do without an ever-expanding critical discourse. Pundits these days are fond of talking about how someone is doubling-down on some idea or another. I have not been using the cliché, but in Las Vegas I feel compelled. We need to double-down on deep democracy in the sense of retrieving deliberative practices that have been used to counteract authoritarianism and the most negative aspects of markets (see West, 2004, 3–7, 13). We need to double-down on promoting critical language awareness, on having students search and strive for intellectual substance rather than mere spectacle. As we engage the most diverse kindergarten-through-college student body in the history of the United States in terms of ethnicity, national origin, and native language use, it remains important to consider to what extent our conjoint response to the language opportunities and challenges that abound fulfill a substantive democratic vision. Which teaching and learning moments aid the project? Allow me to sketch a view of some of the linguistic sensitivity and rhetorical preparation required.

Always central to my conception of teaching is the notion of linguistic equality. Led by Jerrie Scott, Geneva Smitherman, and others, we have done a lot of work

in NCTE around the issues of respecting, as part of progressive curriculums, the mother tongues of students and building on the competence that students possess in their languages of nurture. We have to broaden these pluralist efforts both within the Council membership and beyond. Students performing academic work in the language that is most comfortable to them is sometimes the best indicator of whether they will do any academic work at all. A positive disposition toward language variety on the part of teachers will produce better programs for students than will the desire to eradicate language differences. It will encourage students in the long run to become more attentive to language use *per se*. So let vernaculars and multilingual combinations flourish as ways of making sense of the world.

I am reminded of one of my favorite songs from bygone years, “Back Stabbers,” by The O’Jays (1972). You are probably familiar with those lyrics about folks smiling in your face while all the time trying to take your place. That’s them back stabbers. They tryin’ to get your girl—or significant other, let’s say. As the anguish over these back stabbers builds through the song, the singers intensify the indictment, even informing listeners that these unsavory rivals sneakily visit their homes. As Eddie Levert bursts out, “I don’t even be home and they just keep on comin’.” Now, in listening to this song, I never wanted him to sing “I’m usually not home” or “I’m characteristically not home” or “I’m habitually not home but they continue to appear at my residence nonetheless.” No, “I don’t even be home and they just keep on comin’.” I always needed to hear the Ebonic-emotive force of that durative *be* because it made me feel the song or, phrased alternately, feel the meaning of the song. In other words, “I don’t even be home” can be translated, but, given personal traits, social-cultural factors, and matters of exigency, it is not possible to derive an exact equivalent. In any case, I am never searching for exact equivalents. I need what I need.

I don’t know how many wounds Eddie, William (Powell), and Walter (Williams) really suffered. I know I have a few scars from back then. But there was always the optimism expressed by The Dramatics (1973): “Uh oh, girl, I think that I have fell for you.” For me, they could not sing, “I think that I have fallen for you.” That would have messed up the socio-neurolinguistic groove. It still will on most occasions. Unless I am ready to hear another way, it would be irrelevant, even silly, to explain that official taste dictates that the line should be rendered in the present perfect tense, with the past participle accompanying the helping verb *have*. Neither did I ever need a lesson in how to listen to my imaginary squeeze Mary Wells (1964), especially when she sang, “You best be believin’ I won’t be deceivin’ my guy.” Yeah, you *best* be.

The point that I am reinforcing, of course, is that we should try to connect with students through language that they view or hear favorably. This is not to restrict them or us. This is not to essentialize them or us, for what is deemed favorable varies and in any case is only known through experimentation. Rather, it

is a strategy that simply acknowledges that the experiences that we want to make available to them through language can only be read through the experiences that language has made available to them. Powerful points of merger are what we are after, an interaction of symbols during which new content is forged, thus leading to new understandings and feelings.

I recall an example from ninth grade. My teacher wrote on the blackboard the first stanza of “The Man with the Hoe,” Edwin Markham’s 1899 classic:

Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground
The emptiness of ages in his face
And on his back the burden of the world.

That sounded like the blues to me, the blues in pentameter. I could comprehend those lines and use them to comprehend.

Bowed by the weight of centuries the monkey uses
His wit and makes the lion fuck with the elephant.

Bowed by the weight of centuries Bigger Thomas smothers
Mary Dalton and plots his doomed escape.

Bowed by the weight of centuries the Seven Days responds
In anger and produces a Guitar Baines.

My meter is a little ragged, but you get the gist. “The Man with the Hoe,” “The Signifying Monkey,” *Native Son*, and *Song of Solomon*—poem, folklore, novels—blend into interpretation. Creative representing of experience provokes inquiry, analysis, and, in some instances, we hope, compassionate embrace. This is what happened when Markham viewed the 1863 painting *La Homme de la Houe*, by Jean-Francois Millet, that inspired his verse. This is a case, Sandy Hayes (program chair), of “dream connect ignite” (Convention theme). This demonstrates the cognitive and social value of the humanities.

Bowed by the weight of centuries she sends/Her daughter to school and keeps her fingers crossed. My meter is a little better as I move to consider that mother’s desire. She is going to want her daughter to make it in society. I am all for that. But I am also interested to see to what extent that little girl gets to *make* society, and in this regard the formal study of rhetoric could be important. Semantically, I am not talking about rhetoric as specious or vacuous language, which is how it is often portrayed. Pedagogically, I am not talking about delivering instruction based on the stuffy Roman handbooks that became the staid British handbooks and then the deadly American handbooks. I am talking about specific immersion in a critical

method. Language, as scholar Jennifer Richards (2008) points out, “is essentially and inescapably rhetorical” (11). She adds that rhetoric can be understood as a “process of argument, a way of thinking which understands that all positions are ultimately arguable” (13), and she suggests, furthermore, “Rhetoric is useful not only because it makes us ‘persuasive’ but also because it makes us self-reflexive. In this respect, it represents the beginning of critical thinking” (176).

So you can discern the program that I am devising for our little girl. I want to position her to be a creator of knowledge, to be an unflinching questioner, to be a clarifier of issues, to be a shaper of opinion, to be someone who helps to bring into existence the Great Community. That social formation cannot reach its full potential without her. People often ignore this last point when they narrowly discuss educational goals in terms of skills learning or college readiness or job readiness— or even in terms of student-centeredness or access to the language of wider communication. The essential notion, rather, is to conceive of becoming public-centered and to realize that all voices are needed to decide what that public can be, to determine, in fact, what opportunity/economic structures need to be erected, what further communication needs to unfold. No one segment of society possesses the social intelligence to decide wisely for all. Our little girl is indispensable.

Some of you will recognize the strong alignment with the vision of John Dewey (1927/1991). This is obviously no accident. I teach Dewey often, and in fact, I am teaching him this semester. One of my current students, Olivia Miller, admired Dewey’s overall analysis in his book *The Public and Its Problems*. However, she gathered that Dewey might have been a little too pessimistic about the prospects of his ideas gaining traction. She placed emphasis on his statement that “some few persons who know what they are about are taking advantage of massed force to conduct the mob their way” (18). She also wondered about his comment that “we are bound to say that it is assumed without question that certain persons were fit to be rulers because of traits independent of political considerations (78). She conceded that, in her words, “historically, people have chosen their leaders or representatives based on characteristics unrelated to their abilities to hold a political position. Men have been chosen as leaders based on age, success in war, and more currently, charisma.”

Olivia e-mailed me:

- On a more positive note, throughout my years of schooling, I have been taught to think critically constantly.
- English classes—constantly asked to analyze.
- Classes on rhetoric—English 15, CAS 213, and English 474, taught constantly how to interpret messages.

- CAS book comes out and says that one of the goals of the course is to “offer useful advice on how to become a more effective persuader and to resist influence attempts.”
- Even students in business-related classes are being asked to think of their own products.
- Education is no longer focused on recitation and memorization. Teachers are being taught to promote complex thinking and critical analysis in their students. I truly believe these ideals of education will only expand into more subjects in the future. This improvement in education provides hope for a society that resembles more closely “the Great Community.” (10/1/12)

Really? I thought. Such wonderful news. Features of the rhetorical education that Olivia describes should infuse curriculums at all grade levels. These are notions to push, as Precious Jones might agree. Such work involves, as my student’s comments suggest, astute engagement with media.

Election seasons always remind me of the importance of media literacy, especially when I witness some of the scripted pageants that pass as debates. One sees the logic in the suggestion of columnist Mike Lupica (2012) that we should go to a game-show format and keep score, with candidates losing points for misleading the public or outright lying. Then we can simply watch the scoreboard instead of being caught up in the spin cycles of the dominant news networks. With the game-show format we could more easily determine a winner. This procedure could be as clean as *Jeopardy*, Mr. Lupica, without jeopardizing, ironically, the public welfare at all.

NCTE has long been concerned with this issue, as evident by its 1975 “Resolution on Promoting Media Literacy,” which directs the organization to “support curriculum changes designed to promote sophisticated media awareness” and “cooperate with organizations and individuals representing teachers of journalism, the social sciences, and speech communication to promote the understanding and develop the insights students need to evaluate critically the messages disseminated by the mass media.” These directives are still relevant but assume new urgency given that control of news outlets is concentrated in many fewer hands than was the case in the 1970s. Fewer than twenty companies own virtually all of them (see McChesney, 2008, 383). Just since 2009, 450 newspapers in this country have ceased operation, leaving a huge void in the coverage of a myriad of local issues (McChesney & Nichols, 2010/2011, x). Moreover, on the international front, there has been a drastic reduction in the number of foreign bureaus operated by the major networks. By 2007, virtually none existed in Africa, India, or South America, areas where a couple of billion people reside (see McChesney, 2008, 120). These statistics point to shrinkage in terms of the local and international perspectives offered to the American public. Seriously compromised is the idea of free-flowing

information to inform the deliberations of citizens so that they can effectively exercise self-government. Streamed at citizens instead is the restrictive coverage tied to a corporate bottom line. Recall how many times you have sat through the rehashing of the train-wreck of some celebrity's life. Some reporters seem apologetic on these occasions, offering with chagrin the reasoning that people are talking about the issue so they have to cover it. No, their bosses *want* to cover it and make the decision to do so seem *natural*. Or think of the times when a television reporter announces a topic that is of extreme interest to you—a health or safety issue, say, advice that they say may save your life. “You won’t want to miss this,” they may even promise. But you have to persevere, if you choose, through a round or two of commercials, maybe a recital of recent crimes, weather reports, and sports results. Then you can have your life saved. Of course, nothing is wrong with covering celebrity train wrecks or with your patience and tolerance, even respect, for typical reportage. But you must admit that if you are in the mood for professional, up-to-date investigation of a much broader range of pressing issues, you will be hard-pressed to find it on commercial outlets.

For our purposes, therefore, a relevant concern with media is not simply that we help students to consume them more critically but that we struggle to create pathways for a greater variety of viewpoints. The Internet certainly holds promise in this regard and has proven to be a boon to watchdog journalism, for example. But the Web is not immune to censorship and the prevalence of market forces and, thus, has not leveled the playing field as much as some had predicted.

In *The Myth of Digital Democracy*, Matthew Hindman (2009) debunks the notion that the Internet has amplified the ordinary citizen's political voice by means of a plethora of websites and blogs. He reveals that expertise, financial resources, and even the architecture of the Internet—its channeling systems of links, software codes, and search engines—result in more audience concentration than what exists in print media (100). The top layer of the blogosphere in terms of hits is mainly the province of educated white male professionals (128). Thus Hindman concludes, “It may be easy to speak in cyberspace, but it remains difficult to be heard” (142). Advancing a different argument, although similarly concerned with technical constraints on the diversification of opinion, Cass Sunstein (2007) suggests that the Internet enables intense polarization as users comb the blogosphere primarily to solidify already-held ideas. They search not for general-interest news but seek to create what Sunstein, following MIT professor Nicholas Negroponte, labels the “Daily Me.” To be clear, the point is not that the Internet determines such acts—only that it is the perfect vehicle for indulging in such behavior because of the efficient filtering that can be achieved. Neither is it the point that we should not consult with like-minded analysts in cyberspace. Certainly we should. But we should not do it exclusively, Sunstein argues, because it encourages extremism and severely diminishes the common experiences and unanticipated encounters

that are vital to democratic culture (5–6). We need more “street corners,” Sunstein posits, maybe like those on which I spent a lot of time. There was no telling what would transpire. And it was typical that one speaker might try to dissuade another. One technique would be to exclaim simply, “Oh, here you go again with that old -----.” But usually you still had a chance to go. You got a turn. A structural solution to the related problem of access indicated by Hindman and Sunstein involves building a broader, more vibrant public media sector both online and off. Big Bird is going to be fine. Enough private money backs him that he was going to be secure even if Mitt Romney had been elected. But we need additional, varied commitments, and perhaps NCTE has a role to play in convincing legislators to authorize some of them. The following statistics could help. For every dollar per capita that the United States spends on public media, South Korea spends \$8, Canada spends \$22, Australia spends \$26, and Japan spends \$59, as does Ireland. The United Kingdom spends \$80. Denmark and Finland each spend a shade over \$100 (*Changing Media*, 267).

To tie the question of strengthening the public media sector explicitly to schooling, communication scholar Robert McChesney, whose thoughts I have been echoing to a great extent, proposes increased support for student media. He notes that more than 20 percent of American high schools have none (McChesney & Nichols, 2010/2011, 171). He then asserts:

Focusing on high-school media has an especially strong social component. The budget-cutting frenzy that has been clobbering school districts across the country for the better part of two decades has been especially hard on journalism education in poor, working-class and majority-minority schools. The papers in these schools—which have historically played outsized roles in surrounding neighborhoods—are now fighting for survival. We can and must reinvestigate them, not merely as educational tools but also as potential sources of information for adults in rural communities and urban neighborhoods that long ago were abandoned by commercial media. And we should couple new investments in the institutions of high-school journalism with media-literacy classes for students emphasizing the civic role of journalism.” (171)

My only corrective to this view is to include in the vision grades earlier than high school. It would benefit our little girl, the one with the bowed-by-the-weight-of-centuries mother.

Given limited government resources, it may be difficult to win the case for committing significant taxpayer dollars to some of the new initiatives that would directly and indirectly enhance schooling. But this is precisely the strategy that prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz (2012) recommends. He confronts a bleak picture of rampant inequality—including the erosion of chances for advancement—which makes our economic system unstable because of decreased productivity

and imperils democracy (xii). Because one out of six Americans lives in poverty (17), and impoverished parents tend not to have wealthy offspring (funny how that works out), the opportunity gap widens when the children of the economically privileged have far more access to elite education—kindergarten through college—than the children of the poor or the children of the middle class, for that matter. Only 9 percent of the students at highly selective colleges (mainly private) come from the bottom half of economic percentiles; 74 percent come from the top quarter (19). Seventy percent of higher education students are enrolled in public colleges, where tuition increases far outpace gains in the incomes of average families (94) and set many students on the road to considerable debt, an average of \$25,000 by the time of graduation (95). In short, poorer students begin behind and generally stay behind. They have less chance at the education that leads to the better jobs. Decline in opportunity, Stiglitz notes, reinforces and increases inequality, which, in turn, portends an increasingly divided and stratified America if the political system refuses to curb the excesses of the market or deal effectively with the market's failures (18). Therefore, Stiglitz proposes that “investing more in our society—in education, technology, and infrastructure—and providing more security to ordinary citizens will lead to a more efficient and dynamic economy, one more consistent with what we claim to be and offering more opportunity to a wider segment of the society” (267). From my perspective, this proposed investment must include the language arts, the humanities, and rhetorical preparation broadly conceived. It is important for students to negotiate terrains of language to complete overall programs of study.

This, then, is the common core: a rich variety of reading and writing experiences to foster critical language awareness and rhetorical capacity; a doctrine of linguistic equality to promote fuller participation by a diverse student body; media initiatives to enhance explicitly and implicitly the development of student-citizens; productively crafted “street corners” inside schools to induce unanticipated encounters; provision of funding to strengthen the functioning of schools as instruments of social and economic opportunity.

At the close of his most famous poem, Edwin Markham wonders about the peasant who might rise from “the silence of the centuries” looking insistently for justice and love. Whatever rebellion breaks will be largely through language.

After the silence of the centuries, Precious writes her son Abdul/And imagines him a literate life.

ABCDEF. G, my favorite letter. Then come all of the rest plus other alphabets and sign systems. These are just about the most precious things that we humans possess. All them configurations make up words. Them words everything.

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