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A PEOPLE'S HISTORY: TEACHING AN URBAN NEIGHBORHOOD AS A PLACE OF SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT

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In many inner-city neighborhoods, competing interests are on stark display through struggles over community development, where economic disenfranchisement and social oppression meet material wealth and social affluence head on. Over-the-Rhine is no exception. In 1950 approximately 30,000 people resided in the Cincinnati neighborhood of Over-Rhine, with whites constituting 95% of that population. Recent data show a population of about 7,600 residents, 80% black. Of the current residents, the median household income for four is less than \$10,000. Of Over-the-Rhine's 5,200 habitable units, many are below housing code standards. Nearly 500 buildings stand vacant. Over-the-Rhine suffers from many of the classic problems associated with low-income urban environments: population decline, homelessness, increased segregation, building abandonment, high rates of unemployment and underemployment, and little access to political power ("Over-the-Rhine, Our Community").

The call for rehabilitating this environment and the people residing there has long been a rallying cry for a professional class with vested interest to return the neighborhood to its "former glory" of the nineteenth century. Indeed, many adhere to the belief that developing the area only requires the free-market and entrepreneurial spirit to take center stage. This movement toward economic rejuvenation is very much underway. As described in a recent airing of National Public Radio's *Weekend Edition Sunday* (December 24, 2006), "The first time you come and drive through Over-the-Rhine, you'll focus on the street corner drug sellers. The second time, you'll notice the Italianate architecture, the bright colors. And then you'll see the coffee shop that sells used books, the art galleries, music clubs."

The neighborhood is gentrifying. The threat of further displacement continues, and the future viability of a long-term local grassroots movement to secure the livelihood of low-income residents and workers remains under siege. Over the past forty years, the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement, a network of organizations based in social service, community education, the arts, welfare rights, and affordable housing development, has consistently addressed issues of racial equity and social justice as well as provided needed services for residents. The success of the People's Movement activists over the years is most evident in their historical efforts to stave off economic development plans done at the expense of low-income people.

Recent corporate efforts to transform Over-the-Rhine make it essential that the work of the community organizations affiliated with the People's Movement be supported to

enhance redevelopment in the neighborhood. With this in mind, a community literacy project is currently underway that seeks to enhance the reading, writing, and leadership skills of inner-city residents and university students to document and publicize the rich history of activism in Over-the-Rhine over the last forty years. All too often, attempts by these community organizations to publicly voice their concerns are not taken seriously. The literacy skills employed by many People's Movement activists are typically not "prized" by those in power. As a result, their ability to shape the future of Over-the-Rhine and actively participate in public deliberations is not fully realized. If the voices of these community activists are silenced, then the rich history of grassroots organizing at the core of Over-the-Rhine might be lost. Even though the powerful tend to ignore their point of view, these activists understand how their own voices are central to the movement toward community self-determination.

This community literacy project is taking place as a community-university partnership culminating in the creation of an Oral History Document designed to draw from the voices of Over-the-Rhine residents, workers, and activists to call attention to historical and contemporary stories of community struggles and empowerment. A major goal of the project is to work with community members to help write such stories so they can enhance their literacy skills while inspiring them to grow as active citizens. The central conviction of the project organizers is that community residents and workers in Over-the-Rhine stand to benefit greatly from participation in a community literacy project that builds on the rich history of community activism already in motion in the neighborhood.

The conversation that follows brings together two university teachers and a community activist collaborating on a community-based course as part of this project and takes place at the planning stage, a few weeks before actual class meetings have begun. Thus, the conversation should be understood as an effort to use past experiences and current knowledge to help conceive and theorize the course and project more fully. The conversation is motivated by a desire to reflect extensively on issues related to the activities of teaching and learning in Over-the-Rhine. The participants also seek to learn more deeply about each other's respective point of view based on these exchanges.

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¹ The Miami University Center for Community Engagement in Over-the-Rhine (www.fna.muohio.edu/cce) is a collaboration between Miami University and community groups within Over-the-Rhine. The Center provides a setting for faculty and students from a variety of disciplines to work collaboratively with neighborhood organizations and residents on common projects for the community's cultural and economic advancement.

students participating in the Over-the-Rhine Residency Program. *Christopher Wilkey* is an Assistant Professor of English at Northern Kentucky University, just across the river from Cincinnati. Northern Kentucky University is a suburban university with a largely commuter campus and many first-generation college students. Currently, he is teaching a writing course focusing on Over-the-Rhine while holding class meetings in the neighborhood.

This conversation is moderated by *Donelle Dreese*, a multicultural/environmental literature professor. Her interests include the relationship between people and the places they inhabit, environmental racism and social justice movements.

As the following exchanges demonstrate, organizing a community-university partnership in a neighborhood like Over-the-Rhine poses a number of challenges for teachers interested in working with others for social change in an urban environment.

DD: Embarking on a community-based outreach project such as this one in a neighborhood like Over-the-Rhine is bound to present a whole host of ethical dilemmas for students who are not from inner-city environments. How do you answer the charge that the socioeconomic chasm between the students and the community makes it nearly impossible to structure a learning experience for students in genuine partnership with community members? How do you see students benefiting from this experience? What is it that you want them to learn about the city, specifically Over-the-Rhine?

CW: There are many possible benefits that I see students gaining through their work in Over-the-Rhine, but perhaps my biggest hope for them revolves around the concept of empathy. Of course, I would like students to be introduced to an environment that challenges them—in a direct and material way—to re-think their everyday understandings of inner-city life, of what it is like to live in poverty in this country in a place like Over-the-Rhine. But I want them to become more critical in the process, especially in terms of how they come to relate to the people and issues in Over-the-Rhine.

How do I want them to work to establish empathy in this context? Basically, I want them to try and inquire into the lives and issues in Over-the-Rhine *but not* with the goal of finding things they can fully identify with, concluding for instance with something like, “Hey, I can *really relate* to where these folks in Over-the-Rhine are coming from. I can see now that they are human beings just like all of us. They have struggles in their lives to try and overcome just like me and everyone else.”

Of course the danger with this student response is that the most pressing struggles facing folks in Over-the-Rhine are likely not the same struggles that my students have faced in their home communities. Most of my students probably have never even witnessed police officers making daily rounds up and down their streets, something which is common in Over-the-Rhine.

- DD: So, how can students come to express a different kind of empathy here, express something that acknowledges the different struggles, yet shows a distinct compassion for the particular struggles Over-the-Rhine residents face on a daily basis?
- CW: I think students can begin by articulating care for Over-the-Rhine residents that reinforces the idea that “I am beginning to understand and appreciate your struggles, so how can I begin *work to support your struggles?*” If students ask this question seriously by the end of the semester, then they truly would be benefiting from this experience.
- TD: Essentially, the concern is not only what students learn but how they learn it. The *what* and *how* are vitally linked. So, for example, students can learn much about the city by sitting in a classroom in Oxford, Ohio. But that same course content is learned differently, and I would argue more deeply, when it’s linked to experiences where students are living in the neighborhood and engaging in service-learning activities and community-based campaigns.

When this goes well, students develop empathy, along the lines that Chris outlines. Developing empathy is important educationally, but I also think it is significant in a larger political sense. At this historical moment, empathy is in pretty short supply. We are living in a time of hyper-individualism, supported by an ideology where the only thing that matters is an unbridled market. This in turn is facilitated by the government at all levels, as we retreat from the social contract of the welfare state designed to protect and serve citizens who cannot be reached by the market. Over the last 25-30 years the state has restructured itself to be right in line with the corporate economic machinery. The dominant ideology involves the virtuous subject and the self-reliant subject. This may work for the upper classes, but it is disastrous for lower/moderate income people, and now even the middle classes are wondering if privatization, deregulation, an unfettered market, and the loss of the public sphere are such good ideas.

Through empathy, my students from the Residency Program last fall began to see how such world shifts in the political-economy impacted drastically the daily lives and hopes of Over-the-Rhine citizens. And equally important here, to my mind, is that through this greater empathic understanding, students learn more about themselves as moral and political beings. And I am particularly interested to see if students can come to understand their own privilege and then begin to work against that privilege so that they can actually be in the position to add themselves to what is already happening on the ground in Over-the-Rhine.

- BN: I believe strongly that students can benefit by being engaged with us in Over-the-Rhine because that's what happened to me as a student years ago. I was deeply impacted by participation in community service projects, first in Eastern Kentucky, then as a senior in college doing my fieldwork placement in Over-the-

Rhine. Both environments, the Appalachian mountains and the urban core of Over-the-Rhine, were very different than my northwest Ohio small town experience. My curiosity was piqued because it was so different. But what moved my heart was seeing the injustices in both these places. All that I saw and witnessed shocked me. My mind was challenged to ask deeper questions. How was it that so many people suffered at the bottom of the economic ladder? I had to learn to critically think about how people's lives were impacted by economic disparity, privilege, class, race, and so forth.

I am from a large working class family, but I had never seen poverty this raw and mean. At first I was confused, and didn't know how to be with all of this. I was fortunate to work with people who helped me understand the world wasn't what I had been told, that everyone could make it, if we just worked hard enough. It's hard to explain, but it was like stripping wool off my eyes, and viewing the world with different eyes. It made me feel anxious, my footing on the ground felt insecure. Life was never going to be the same for me if I chose to keep my eyes open to the truth of the disparity I saw. Once my eyes were open to the dynamics of oppressive conditions, I couldn't close them. My conscience was being pricked, and I wanted to live with integrity and be a part of making things right, making things just, getting angry enough myself so that I could move to action to add my two cents worth in making changes. Of course, it takes a while to move from anger to action. I do believe a person needs patience to soak in a different environment, a different culture of people, than his or her own. We can come with so many assumptions about "the Other" that it takes time to realize what those assumptions are and tear them apart with a closer critical eye.

I believe students can make connections with their own lives, and the lives of people here in Over-the-Rhine. Sometimes students, if they can look back far enough, or investigate their own family's journey, they might find something they can connect with. I know my parents struggled with making ends meet. I think that's why I connected immediately with the economic struggles here in Over-the-Rhine. But it took me a while longer to crack into my white privilege because of the advantages I received being white, and I didn't understand that at first. I guess I have a worldview, too, that we are all brothers and sisters; we've got to see our humanity in common. Every person has the capacity to engage with us in Over-the-Rhine if they are willing to open their eyes, hearts and minds to our experiences and trust that life is not the same for everybody in America; there are grave disparities depending upon who you are and where you stand.

The difference between classroom learning and community-based learning is that community-based learning puts you in the moment. It makes a difference when two or more people are engaged and you can have a body experience, not just a mind experience. When you can look someone in the eye and listen to his or her story, your heart is touched. And like you said, Chris, empathy starts developing. It's not pity for people; that doesn't get us anywhere. But developing a genuine concern about the lives of those making a way out of no way, here in the urban

- core of Cincinnati, can help to begin to address changes. Along with the empathy comes a willingness to critically look at structures to see how all this fits in the bigger picture of how things work in society. Sort of what Tom was talking about. There is always a risk involved because students can sometimes be patronizing, condescending, and intimidating because of the level of their formal education. I think it takes a sensitive student to appreciate the gold mine of learning and opportunities for growth when engaged here in Over-the-Rhine. This relationship has to be mutual. The people of Over-the-Rhine have to benefit, too, and sometimes I worry about that equation because it's tougher to realize for the neighborhood.
- DD: It's a difficult thing, I would think, to help students understand the difference between pity and empathy, and also to help them address their own tendencies to stereotype or objectify, or even become crusaders for the cause without understanding how even that can be an act of privilege. How then can teachers ask students to negotiate relationships with community members in ways that are productive?
- BN: It's important to help students realize that moral decisions may look different because the range of choices may be limited due to class and race. If a single Mom is trying to make ends meet, she may do "under-the-table work" to stretch her income. I think pity smacks of "feeling sorry for someone" without the willingness to critically look at the injustices that may be affecting a group of people. Pity does not move us to action. I do think it's important to process with students the feelings that come up when you see someone suffering from injustices. It can be overwhelming because you don't know what to do. There is a danger to look at people in poverty as "victims" rather than encouraging people to be actors in their own history. I think students need to be patient and allow the space for relationships to grow. It takes time to build trust. A person has to "earn credits" in a neighborhood and a struggle that is not their own. That's where service work can demonstrate that one is willing to give time where it is needed. It takes time to understand a culture and history of people. It takes time to know a neighborhood's politics. You can't come in like storm troopers, thinking you know what's best. Humility is necessary. People can pick up pretty quickly the sincerity and motives of "students wanting to help." Part of the work is JUST BEING REAL, being yourself, doing the work necessary to build real relationships. It's learning how to recognize where leadership already exists and encourage and support that rather than stepping in and taking it over.
- TD: I have seen many responses on the part of students that have come to Over-the-Rhine: pity, guilt, empathy, *noblesse oblige*, vanguardism, or what you are calling crusader-like behavior. The students I bring to Over-the-Rhine are bright, generally conservative, from suburban and small town backgrounds, usually well-off, highly individualistic, and privileged. I think the key concern here is privilege. Like my wife Janis constantly tells me, "Privilege is a learning disability." My students generally come to Over-the-Rhine with two ideologies of

service learning bouncing around in their heads. First, many are motivated by philanthropy—they want to help, to do good, to be of service, to provide charity. In some cases, this way of thinking codifies into noblesse oblige—the view that the students’ privilege should be honored precisely because they are acting in moral and upstanding ways to help their fellow humankind who just happen to be less fortunate. Second, other students approach service learning as a kind of vanguardism, whereby their intent is to bring order, activism, or an already-articulated-mission to the community.

These seemingly different approaches are merely opposite sides of the same coin—both share the same problematic underlying principles. Here, service learning is what you do *to* a community, not with it. There is a deep-seated dehumanizing chauvinism here: the community is positioned as helpless, without agency. Community in these views can never be a source of knowledge; there is nothing to learn from the community. Further, neither of these approaches generally leads students to a social analysis of the maldistribution of inequity: inequity just is. Such an ideology rarely gets student to see themselves as socially constructed beings—as raced, classed, and gendered individuals—and their place within the social hierarchy.

I agree totally with you, Bonnie, that humility is necessary. To my mind it’s key. You also make excellent points about trust, and the time it takes to build such trust. But I also think that there are forms of community engagement that can happen in multiple time frames. Regardless of the timeframe, my main intention is to organize learning experiences through which students/faculty surface and then challenge their own privilege, and where community residents can surface and then challenge their internalized oppression.

- DD: In considering your responses, I can’t help thinking that there is potential for such profound personal growth and increased social awareness that can occur for students. But what about the community members? How can projects such as the Residency Program and the community literacy project benefit inner-city communities like Over-the-Rhine? And then, how do teachers work in collaboration with community members to organize educational projects that ethically invite participation from the community?
- CW: I think a neighborhood like Over-the-Rhine benefits most from the kind of community-based education we are involved in when our collective efforts move others beyond personal transformation and toward actual social transformation in the community at large. What I mean here by social transformation is that whatever project we are working on, it needs to act as an intervention in the public affairs of the community. Just like Tom and Bonnie, I too see myself and students as working with the community. Intervention that works with the community, rather than against the community or in service to the community, is mutually beneficial for teachers, students, and Over-the-Rhine community members alike. But the primary focus of change remains the community at

large, including those folks in Over-the-Rhine who are not directly participating in the project at all. This, I think, is our biggest hope for the community literacy project and the Residency Program; we don't just want to do this work to feel good about what we are doing; we want to do this work as a powerful step forward in making change across the entire neighborhood. What is at stake in our work is nothing less than reviving the struggle against gentrification in Over-the-Rhine.

- TD: It is true that students' learning is very high. After all, Over-the-Rhine is a new neighborhood with experiences typically quite different from what they are accustomed to. When students open their minds and hearts to those experiences, the result is rich. Of course, from my point of view, learning on the community's side I hope is equally rich. This, too, requires community members to open their hearts and minds to the engagement, which is no automatic thing, not because community residents are inherently callous, but because students are guests in the community and they are often naïve. It is often recognized by community residents that students have a steep curve to learn about the community, and it is the job of those residents to help students negotiate that curve. This is learning in only one direction, however. I think the only way to ensure mutual learning is to have the topics of student projects and papers come out of a conversation with the community leadership. That way, community leaders are invested in the student outcomes, and their learning is also directly impacted by the engagement.
- BN: I think the part of the equation where the community benefits, is tougher to measure. I believe we need to constantly reflect on our experiences so as to improve how the community benefits. Sometimes the benefit to the community is practical in that a housing unit gets worked on by students in the Residency Program. Community members often spend a lot of time imparting knowledge and history to the students. Sometimes community people can feel taxed, but other times this "telling" can remind us how far we've come in our struggles, which helps to affirm our hard work. We get many requests from academia, area high schools, and social justice committees from churches for urban experiences and community service. Our neighborhood becomes a laboratory for learning. What I think about often is how much time we end up giving to people requesting services from us from outside the neighborhood, as compared to us doing concrete education work with our own people. People wanting to experience Over-the-Rhine seem to be able to express their needs in this regard; they are much more forthright in asking for our time. And sometimes without sensitivity to how much time and cost this entails. I feel a tug-pull and sometimes question my loyalties. I want my energy to enhance our efforts here at home in Over-the-Rhine. I wrestle with whether or not our community benefits as much as the students. It's harder to actualize benefits for the neighborhood. I want to challenge us to make the benefits equal. This community literacy project hopefully can highlight the voices of our people, so they can be made more visible. It's a way for us to say the voices of the poor should count as much as those with money and

power. Committing to the stories of the people says we "honor you, we want to celebrate you, what you have to say deserves to be recorded."

TD: I think Bonnie makes two excellent points that I would like to extend a bit. The first is her concern with the seemingly innocuous phrase, "Our neighborhood becomes a laboratory for learning." The perception that Over-the-Rhine is a laboratory is precisely the problem, and too many of my colleagues see the community exactly in this way. Because when a community is seen as a laboratory, the kinds of practices and teaching/research interventions that follow from the academic side of the equation are already rigged to benefit outsiders' learning at the expense of community residents. The assumption is that community members are at the beck and call of academics, both students and faculty. "Community work" in this regard is more something you do *to* a community rather than *with* it.

Bonnie's second point refers to the new roles that community members come to play in the new relationships that are formed by the students' engagement with the community. As students bring energy and curiosity to Over-the-Rhine to learn about its people and history through their engagement, the relationships formed with the students provide new opportunities for neighborhood people to tell their story, which affirms and honors their experiences. For example, Mike Rogers, a staff member of Over-the-Rhine Community Housing who has worked directly with students for three years renovating a vacant storefront for a coffee shop, recently said in the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, "Those kids have changed my life dramatically. They have no idea. They allow me to mentor them" (Smith Amos B1). Acting now in new roles as mentors and teachers, community residents are able to share their histories, and in the process, often deepen their own understanding of their own struggle.

BN: Yes, Tom, if we are seen as a laboratory we can become a science project where we are observed, poked and prodded, rather than engaged. Coming up with experiences that are mutual is more an "art" that involves respect and some real ethics. There is no recipe. It is about an evolving relationship that demands mutual respect and appreciation for the varied gifts. Community people have different "credentials" that need to be recognized. And in this whole mix is the issue of power and how power operates. Students need to understand how power works, so they can better understand the structures that oppress communities like ours and help to challenge and change those structures of domination.

CW: Your point, Bonnie, about how students need to gain some understanding of how power works to oppress communities like Over-the-Rhine, makes me think about what I referred to earlier when I said that our collective work on a community project should involve interventions that lead to social transformation, not only personal transformation. In this sense, the primary benefit for local community members of say, this community literacy project, would be the outcomes and consequences of having their voices heard and appreciated by a

broader public, of having just what you said, the feelings of honor and recognition that come with making more publicly visible the multitude of experiences they have dealt with under circumstances of extreme difficulty. If students are going to be active participants and authentic learners in this project, then the students do have to come to some understanding of how power all too often works to exclude the voices of the poor from open forums where public policy issues in Over-the-Rhine are deliberately discussed. Only then, will students be in a position to fully appreciate, and give full recognition to, these local community members' stories and perspectives. In essence, students would then understand that they are involving themselves in a project that, I dare say, is actually radical and potentially politically transformative for all involved.

DD: It sounds like you are calling for some sort of social advocacy in your goals here. Aren't you in danger of having this become more about your activist or academic agendas rather than the desires of the people who live in Over-the-Rhine? For example, when you call for an end to gentrification, or when you say that you want students to more fully appreciate the voices of the poor, how are these objectives not about you and your own political motives? And how do you deal with the fact that not all community members are going to agree about what is best for them? Who decides what is best for the people in Over-the-Rhine? I guess the question I'm getting at here is, what role, if any, should advocacy play in our teaching practices when working on a community-based project?

TD: I have no hesitation in asserting that my teaching entails social advocacy. I don't have a problem with my self-understanding that I have an activist or academic agenda. I don't have a problem with me being clear with my students that I am against gentrification or that I would like for them to fully appreciate the voices of the poor—to understand the poor as “gifts,” as Bonnie would put it. To me, the issue is not my social advocacy; but in saying this, I am not suggesting that I and my students should ride roughshod over the desires of the Over-the-Rhine people. As Paulo Freire and Myles Horton instructed, we have to start from where the people are. But at the same time, this also does not suggest that those desires of Over-the-Rhine folks are pure, correct, or always to be followed. If people in Over-the-Rhine live under oppression and have internalized that oppression, simply accepting their desires may not lead to any social transformation. Thus, the whole point of community engagement on the part of academics (students and faculty) is to be in a genuine, mutual dialogue with community folks so that all are transformed by the interaction. I come to Over-the-Rhine because I want my learning to deepen even though I socially advocate for certain ends.

Regarding Chris's thought, the only issue that I would take with it, is the assumption that validating people's voices to a broader public through the community literacy project is somehow socially transformative in and of itself. I think validation is great, and necessary, but not enough by itself. The question for me that still needs to be asked is: What is it that the people have learned through

the community literacy process and how has that learning taken political shape so that some kind of future action may be possible?

CW: You're right, Tom, to suggest that what ultimately matters is that learning takes place for all involved so as to hopefully secure future political actions that are progressive. While the very act of validating people's voices will not automatically lead to the kind of social transformation we have been talking about, all the learning on the part of project participants leading up to that validation and after it—all the inquiry into the lives and struggles and hopes of Over-the-Rhine community folks—all these things are what make future progressive political action possible as a direct result of this project. And, I would add that "the powerless" or "the poor" having their voices validated in the public arena can have huge political consequences for a neighborhood like Over-the-Rhine; it really has the potential of making others stand up and take notice. But, at the same time, more folks in the public at large need to get to the point to where they are deeply open and receptive to actually being "moved" by the stories told by community members in the community literacy project. I just don't think we should under-estimate the transformative and redemptive power of what would count as productive interactions across systems of privilege and oppression as represented through interactions between faculty, students, and Over-the-Rhine community members—interactions that benefit deeply through the contributions of the voices of the oppressed because so often these contributions go unnoticed.

DD: How do you respond to the criticisms that what you are doing in Over-the-Rhine is perhaps propaganda, or that social activism or advocacy has no place in the classroom whether you're teaching the city or any social cause?

CW: It is the commitment to certain ends in teaching as a social advocate that so often disturbs more traditional teachers and scholars who insist that academic work should be about studying subjects in the search for truth and should have nothing to do with advocating for a particular political or social cause. From their viewpoint, making teaching and academic study largely a political project only works to distort "the truth" by propagating a version of the truth that privileges a particular view without giving full credence to competing perspectives. Not only that, for them, teaching should never have an activist dimension because the appropriate role of academics is to be a critical thinker or cultural critic, not a social activist seeking change in the community. They don't want academics in activist roles because learning, for them, is about learning to think--not learning how to act in the world as a social or political actor (which, according to them, can only lead to bad thinking because it makes us less "objective" and so unable to see "the full picture" that real scholarly inquiry and teaching requires).

Well, their argument can be challenged on two fronts: The assertion that an academic needs to be concerned only with "the search for truth" and not with promoting a certain political or social cause doesn't make much sense if the academic has come to the conclusion, through academic inquiry, that a certain

political cause does express a truth in and of itself that needs to be promoted in the classroom, the community, and the broader public. Not promoting or advocating on behalf of this political cause, in this case, would be tantamount to not promoting, or advocating for, the truth.

The other half of their argument can be challenged by simply saying that real learning necessarily entails an engagement with the world and can never be realized through some assumed disinterested distance from the world. So, teaching, learning, and scholarship can make a difference in the world and in a neighborhood like Over-the-Rhine.

TD: Good points, Chris. The problem I have with those traditional teachers and scholars who insist that academic work should not be about advocating for a particular political perspective is that they misunderstand how all academic work, in fact, does advocate a political perspective. Everything has political consequences. There is no knowledge that is free from politics. There is no such thing as objectivity—a place where knowledge is free from history and power. All curricula are political. As Freire says, the pedagogical is political, and the political is pedagogical. There is no way to get around this. My more conservative colleagues start from the wrong premise—they think my politics and the knowledge I consider to be important is political while theirs are not. I don't accept the distinction, which is the only basis from which they can argue. So, now, the question I put to my colleagues who have the more traditional view is: Why do you select the knowledge you do and what politics are facilitated by that knowledge? I try to at least have them take responsibility for their politics.

BN: I see the community literacy project as a seed to start recording our history, our efforts, and our perspectives. History leaves us out. If the truth of our experience is never told, then much is lost. Knowledge is power. It's not everything, but it's a piece of how we get left out. If the history of Over-the-Rhine only gets written by the dominant forces, then our voices won't be written into history. We have always said in our effort, a step out of oppression is expression. Sometimes when we can speak about our just anger, that expression can be a catalyst to move us to some kind of action, which then moves to a transformation of some sort.

We really have to be careful. I don't think people from the outside, or academia, understand that people who are oppressed, often do have a clear analysis of what's going on. We understand from a gut level how power can be used against us. Sometimes those of us who want to be a part of creating social change have to listen intently and figure out ways to encourage and support the just anger that already exists in our people about social issues deeply affecting their lives every day.

I also think it is refreshing to hear where people stand on issues. No matter if they are citizens, teachers, students, or politicians. The more we can engage with each

other about our visions for this world we live in, the more we have a chance to make a difference.

TD: I agree with Bonnie, but I also have one distinction to make. I think there is a noticeable gap between “clear analysis” and “gut” feeling. Bonnie’s comments remind me of what Antonio Gramsci, once said: “The popular element ‘feels’ but does not always know or understand; the intellectual element ‘knows’ but does not always understand and in particular does not always feel” (Boggs 79).

This is useful but problematic—useful in that it is largely true, but problematic in that it is not always the case. There are many residents in Over-the-Rhine, Bonnie included, who do have a careful analysis. But many don’t. Some have a lot of gut feelings and experiences, but do not have the theoretical frameworks that can advance those gut feelings. Likewise, there are some academics who do feel, but are sloppy in their theoretical thinking. I am reminded of Lenin’s challenge: “Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.” To me, this means that we need both theory and practice, understanding and feeling. So yes, as Bonnie says, “the more we can engage each other about our visions” the more we can make a difference.

BN: You put "feeling" onto my word "gut." Gut level means to me that we have bodily experiences of oppression, and we understand it in a way that's not so sterile. I didn't mean to generalize. Of course, we here in Over-the-Rhine can strengthen and deepen our analysis as well. I understand that we suffer from internalized oppression. But I think too often people with more formal education think they know better and that discounts our own sense about what's really going on. I also want to say WE ALL have blind spots about how power and privilege operate in our lives.

DD: Placing Over-the-Rhine within its larger context, how might teaching the city become a way of investigating the relationship between “inner- city” environments and neighboring communities? And how can teaching the city be a way of teaching a sense of place?

BN: I think a sense of place is very important. I believe "place" shapes us, affects who we are. In this current mobile society, I believe the groundedness that comes from a sense of place because you are rooted there does not happen as it used to in years past. I know my own working class parents have lived in a small town, in the same home for over sixty years. They raised me to appreciate "the sense of place." I brought that with me when I moved to Over-the-Rhine. I have lived in the same apartment for twenty years and been in the neighborhood since 1970. I still have what I learned from living in a small town surrounded by farming, but now this place, the city and the neighborhood of Over-the-Rhine, has also shaped me. I have a deep appreciation for diversity by living here. My sense of cultural awareness was expanded by living in the city. My sense of needing my neighbors is greater here. But I also know it's hard to live in the city. There is much

deprivation of resources here in our neighborhood. There are less open, green spaces, and I think that impacts the psyche. When surrounded with "concrete" the environment feels hard, not soft. I don't think it has to be hard, but it feels like our neighborhood got abandoned. I do think people who make this neighborhood their home get attached to it. There are many beautiful aspects to living in the city, but it's been hard too. I see how people have to work harder to get their needs met here.

There is probably more to this question than I am pulling out. But when I walk the streets of Over-the-Rhine, I have so many triggered memories of people and corners and actions at various buildings and streets. This place comes alive because of intimate connections made. And when people don't have deep connections, their interests here can be abusive, and violate some basic ethical principles. Because people have struggled to "make a way out of no way" here, a network of support gets weaved, and when that breaks apart or gets destroyed, it's detrimental to the sense of community. Community connections can be made anywhere: rural, small town, city, suburbia. But it takes conscious effort. I think in Over-the-Rhine, our close proximity helps to make connections with our neighbors. We are not cut off by the gates or bushes in our yards. We don't have yards. Stoop sitting and walking to Kroger's enables us to see each other. We aren't glued to a car. All of that impacts how we live.

CW: The picture of Over-the-Rhine that Bonnie presents here stands in stark contrast to the mostly suburban environments that my students are familiar with. Yet, in a sense, I can imagine some of my students claiming that they really know what goes on in an inner-city community like Over-the-Rhine, although when pressed, they would probably have to admit that that "familiarity" comes more from watching the crime reports on the 11 o'clock news than from spending any time in the actual place. Every time I bring up Over-the-Rhine in any of my classes, all my students have an impression of the neighborhood; they all claim "to know" Over-the-Rhine. Many are actually afraid to visit the neighborhood.

It is very interesting to me how Over-the-Rhine, within the cultural imagination of the entire Cincinnati region, has become so symbolic of all the negative images and things that are supposedly wrong with the city: crime, blight, dirtiness, general poverty, etc. While people residing in the community have continually been displaced through an ongoing process of gentrification that has been occurring for more than thirty years now, at the same time, folks in other city neighborhoods and the suburbs have been displacing their deep-seated fears, prejudices, and outrage directly onto Over-the-Rhine, as if Over-the-Rhine is the dark side in a fabricated drama between good and evil in the cultural life of the metro-region. While poor people here are displaced by the powers that be, the powers that be displace their own fears of urban life directly onto the people and place of Over-the-Rhine. Of course, many of the powerful try to relieve their fear of the city by, yet again, displacing their efforts actively to re-make an entire community by giving "new birth" to the neighborhood, to make it "urban-

- chic." Of course, what they fail to see is the very real sense of community that Bonnie just spoke of, a community with families and good people that continues to survive while under siege from forces portending a vision of city life that is really for select individuals from the professional class. Exposing this class conflict in struggles over Over-the-Rhine—from the inside and out—is really what I try to teach my students.
- DD: What possible connections can be made between local urban grassroots efforts, such as those in which you are all involved and broader movements for social justice?
- BN: I feel our neighborhood efforts can improve on this issue of deliberately connecting with broader movements. I know that we have made connections, but it takes a concerted effort, time, and devoted staff to constantly reach out to sustain a relationship. It always feels good to hear from others who are doing similar work, as well as groups we can make connections with because our issues intersect. I think our local effort in Over-the-Rhine made connections with the broader homeless movement across this country through our connections with the National Coalition for the Homeless. Our work in Over-the-Rhine touches many issues that have both national and global significance. I believe we live in structures in the United States that keep us isolated from looking at the bigger picture. We have to be more deliberate and creative in reaching beyond our own borders.
- TD: Building on Bonnie's point about structures in the U.S. keeping us isolated, I've often wondered to what extent are models of community organizing today actually disempowering in a new world order where forces are played out globally. The need now is to create alliances across geography, like what was attempted in the 1960s and 1970s when groups in the U.S. learned significantly from third world liberation movements, something the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement did as well. Organizing at the community level may not be enough—the focus may be too narrow, accentuating one piece of turf, perhaps accentuating one constituency. This isn't to argue against community organizing; it's more to accentuate the need to think internationally when we organize locally.

Linking social movements across geography and constituencies could certainly help organizers in the U.S. to counter feelings of isolation and demoralization that characterize the U.S. left today. But something even more important is at stake. The rest of the world needs a strong resistance movement from within the American belly of the beast. Eric Mann puts it this way: "In the next decade, the U.S. will continue its plan to literally overthrow governments and, if possible, set up puppet regimes all over the world. That is nothing new. What would be new would be an organized opposition inside the U.S. to create an open political debate, and at best, a split in popular opinion that could stay the hand of the U. S. army and CIA and strengthen the sovereignty and self-determination, including their right to social revolution, of oppressed nations throughout the world" (241).

That puts it rather directly. For other places in the world to succeed, they need more activity from within the U.S. I don't mean to make all this sound easy. But I think the focus is correct.

CW: From the perspective of pedagogy, when we think about connecting our local work to global concerns, we should keep in mind that helping people make that connection cannot simply be about providing information about social justice movements and speculations on how such movements might inform our local work. Rather, following what Tom just pointed out, there needs to be sustained efforts to actually reach out across borders to learn from the liberation struggles of others while also forming alliances with them. Forming real alliances within this context requires that new genuine relationships are built, that current social relations of isolation are transformed to be made into actual sites of global democratic exchange and collective opposition against the status quo.

So, in a very real sense, teaching and learning becomes more about educating each other on the possibilities of transforming social relations so as to improve our collective efforts to work for social justice. Looking to global social justice movements for inspiration is important here, but if real alliances are to be built, a fundamental challenge to dominant perspectives on the possibilities of local grassroots activism must be made. We must come to view local actions as manifestations of the global. In the context of our work in Over-the-Rhine, it is coming to understand what Tom has so eloquently argued for elsewhere: Over-the-Rhine is being colonized by the same social forces that are actively disenfranchising other urban communities across the globe. So our only alternative is to liken our local efforts to decolonize Over-the-Rhine with the anti-imperialist struggle to end the War on Iraq.

Conclusion

Since this conversation took place, we have had the opportunity to initiate activities on behalf of this community literacy project. In particular, students began work to gather the stories of volunteers and residents at the Drop Inn Center, a local Over-the-Rhine homeless shelter and social service agency. In addition, students in the Miami University Over-the-Rhine Residency Program collaborated with local residents and workers on a campaign to redevelop a local neighborhood park.

Working on these activities reinforce our conviction that productive community-based teaching and learning requires critical awareness of the ethics involved in partnering with local community members as outsiders. The key ethical consideration here involves the issue of who is to actually benefit from participation in a project designed to promote the broader social good. More time and energy is placed on community activists and workers when representatives of the university continually seek them out to engage in service learning initiatives. The danger is that community members are placed with a higher burden. In a nutshell, university partners need to make sure they are not over-taxing the community. The community should not be viewed as a "laboratory for learning" where

universities can extract community labor to discover new knowledge with little consideration of how that work might reinforce social hierarchies. Rather, teachers and students need to thoughtfully consider how their *particular presence and specific work* can contribute to egalitarian relationships across sites of radical difference.

Forming egalitarian relations across the cultural and economic divide has already been made evident through our initial work on this community literacy project. While engaging in their work with the Drop Inn Center, students participated in a public event honoring and celebrating the shelter's contribution to the neighborhood and the City of Cincinnati. At this event, students presented public poster displays that narrated life stories of struggle and empowerment based on individual oral history interviews with shelter volunteers and residents. Those individuals interviewed were able to see their stories presented back to them and, from all reports, were deeply moved by what the students learned through inquiring into their lived experiences. Likewise, students' perceptions of the neighborhood were fundamentally transformed; students reported how they were able to see and experience a sense of community in a place they previously believed was filled with only blight and crime. Indeed, as a result of participating in this community-based learning activity, community members came to understand themselves as genuine teachers and mentors to the students. In the process, deep relationships were formed that point to the possibility of creating and maintaining new roles for students, teachers, and community partners, which can act as a catalyst for real social change. As participants continuing our work on this community literacy project, we look forward to finding the new paths that might lead to such change.

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