In his most recent book, *Gravyland*, Stephen Parks expends little space arguing *why* progressive politics should be central to the work of writing programs, preferring instead to examine *how* like-minded academics can most effectively promote progressive causes in collaboration with community partners. Parks unabashedly perceives his primary role as a scholar-activist fighting the increasing takeover of the public sector by private interests, as well as the national conservative backlash against the progressive coalitions of the 1960s and 70s. Noting that rhetoric and composition can trace its current academic status back to the open-admissions policies of those decades, policies that reflected a zeitgeist of radical possibility for expanding access to economic and political power, Parks fears that as the field continues to professionalize and gain sway within English departments and beyond, it risks turning its back on the working-class, highly diverse students who made this disciplinary rise possible. For Parks, universities in working-class, urban neighborhoods should not only engage local communities in Ernest Boyer’s (1996) sense of mutualistic problem solving and knowledge production; they should also actively work to form allegiances with local progressive organizations and expand definitions about whose voices count as having legitimate intellectual and aesthetic merit. The collaborative work he pursued for years in Philadelphia soundly reflected these convictions, and this work forms the core of *Gravyland*.

Part of the Institute’s original mission was to create forums for community publishing in which people who often do not get to tell their own stories could speak back to the dominant and often stereotypical narratives that others, particularly in the mass media, tell about them. However, over time Parks became increasingly convinced that while this aspect of community publishing is important, it does not go far enough. Rather, community publishing must become the basis for political and economic empowerment through partnerships that “simultaneously authorize the individual’s voiced experience and work collectively to address the larger social and political contexts in which that personal voice exists,” thereby “linking the act of writing to active community organizing” (p. 33). In this respect, writing beyond the curriculum can enact a hybrid relationship of voices “between individual need and community action” (p. 18). Parks explains that this revised and more actively political mission, which justified changing the Institute’s name to New City Writing and creating a publishing arm, New City Community Press, was to a large extent modeled on the United Kingdom’s Federation of Worker Writers and...
Community Publishers (FWWCP), a coalition of working-class writing groups that brought an anticapitalist vision to publishing by involving "writers in all parts of the writing process, from first draft to laying out text for publication." This process allowed FWWCP to keep the "representation of working-class life...solely in the hands of the working class" while also linking their writing to "political advocacy work" (pp. 12-3). As New City Writing developed, then, Parks adapted the FWWCP's model of community publishing as a pedagogical means to involve students in coalitions with local working-class, progressive organizations.

Adapting Mary Louise Pratt's (1991) famous pedagogical concept of the contact zone, Parks explains that while the contact metaphor "offers a way to imagine our students' work as intimately connected with political debate and change," the "voices of the contact-zone classroom are still primarily textual more than actual" (pp. 114-115). Moreover, Pratt fails to articulate a means for promoting collective change efforts beyond the actions of individuals; that is, Pratt envisions the classroom as a "safe house" rather than as "a space of constant border crossing and engagement with individuals and groups outside the classroom" (pp. 120-1). For Parks, a more politically effectual understanding of the contact zone is necessary, one that "implies the constant need to engage with emergent collective identities as political and social forces that shape the contours of public interaction—from the personal to the political" (p. 121). Consistent with this revised understanding of contact, New City Writing classrooms sought to help students become "active partners in the process of creating a new city—one that would exchange an individualist common sense for a collectivist communal sense, one that was based on a larger sense of justice than the profit motive, and one that would speak to a deeper sense of humanity than currently exists in our public debates" (p. 129).

The book's narrative structure also enables Parks to show the wide diversity of community-literacy projects pursued over the years by New City Writing. These include: Urban Rhythms (chapter one), an online publication of college student and community voices; the Philadelphia Writing Centers Project (chapter two), a public-school partnership that fought the standardization and teacher-proofing of writing curricula; and No Restraints (chapter four), a project to "capture the myriad personal experiences, organized efforts, and situated knowledges existing within Philadelphia's disability community" (p. 102). Parks offers conscientious and probing analyses of these projects, assessing their accomplishments against his own high standard that such work should support or create "progressive community-based institutions" (p. 33). Thus he examines various obstacles that arose, including in some cases tensions among the partners themselves. Considering that the literature on engagement in a variety of disciplines tends to read as the celebration of partnerships in which everyone's needs are met, it is both refreshing and illuminating to see Parks examine the challenges and frustrations that can occur even when all parties have the best intentions.

In chapter three, for example, he tells the story of Glassville Memories (Parks's pseudonym), a book of interviews that focused on the lives of residents from a local Philadelphia neighborhood. This project, which consisted of Temple students conducting ethnographies of Glassville residents, grew out of a partnership between New City Writing, Temple faculty, and a neighborhood association. While the project developed relatively organically from discussions among partners, New City Writing essentially retained editorial control over the book, the first edition of which proved disappointing for many Glassville residents. However, rather than ending as an academic horror story in which a resentful community gets burned, as Paula Mathieu (2005) argues can happen too easily when universities have more power in the relationship, this story had a crucial second act. Following an accountability moment in which community members had the opportunity to express their dissatisfaction to Parks, a renewed collaborative effort began to revise the book. Through this process, trust was gradually reestablished, and a "new model emerged that placed all participants on a common plane for decision making and mandated common access to the means of production" (p. 92, emphasis in original). The second edition, while imperfect, gave the neighborhood association "a publication they felt comfortable sharing at community events, giving to new residents, and using to advocate for community rights" (p. 94). The process, then, became more egalitarian and ultimately produced mutual benefits. Parks concludes from this experience that to ensure community rights of self-representation, "cultural and educational institutions should understand part of their work to be socializing the means of cultural and aesthetic production" (p. 84). Accordingly, he argues, community publishing can "become a key element in casting pedagogical and professional work outward to the culture as a whole" (p. 97), and in so doing, create opportunities for empowerment in working-class communities.

To underline the impact of community publishing, Parks points out that more than 12,000 copies of New City Community Press publications have been sold throughout the country—numbers that dwarf the readership of most academic scholarship—proving that there is a genuine and significant audience for this
work, and making a strong case to recognize the scholarly legitimacy of community voices. In addition to advocating for the rights of communities in Philadelphia, various publications have been incorporated into curricula at both the K-12 and university level, and one text, *Espejas y Ventanas,* became part of “Mexican consulate and embassy education programs” in multiple states (p. 130). Parks includes a sampling of the voices from these projects in chapter five, entitled “The Insights of Everyday Scholars.” Aside from a brief introduction to this chapter, these authors speak for themselves without the need for scholarly commentary and analysis to authenticate their intellectual value, thus reemphasizing Parks’s point about community scholars’ rights to self-representation.

Perhaps more than anything, *Gravyland* will inspire engaged scholars about the extent to which dedicated partners can push the limits of what is feasible and desirable in community-university collaborations. Writing beyond the curriculum suggests a bold vision of what writing programs in the 21st century might look like if, by forming strategic alliances with progressive community organizations, they commit themselves to the cultural, political, social, and economic work of community revitalization. As Parks phrases it, “rather than a disciplinary-based production of knowledge,” such programs would work to “create a dynamic where individuals based in the academy and in the community, the theoretical and the concrete, would interact in the production of a writing studies uniquely tied to its local environment. Our faculty’s efforts would be focused primarily on using writing instruction to support the creation of organic intellectuals, linked to organizational alliances, who could effectively advocate for a progressive sense of literacy and community rights” (p. 206). And with New City Writing, Parks and his various university and community partners have developed the field’s most substantive efforts to realize this vision.

However, while the trajectory of New City Writing demonstrates the real promise of engaged scholarship, it also raises questions about contemporary academe’s suitability for the progressive political work Parks advocates, particularly as a means for resisting broader societal trends. For example, though his argument about socializing the means of aesthetic and cultural production is insightful and audacious, Parks recognizes the inertial power of higher education’s own movement toward elitism and privatization. Particularly as a result of ongoing state budget crises, many public universities will face increasing temptations to pursue the “prestige racket” (Luzer, 2010) over accessibility and equity, and to seek forms of corporate sponsorship that reflect a very different understanding of engagement than what Parks and other progressive scholars envision.

Even at Temple, Parks notes an administrative shift in admissions priorities away from the traditional demographic of Philadelphia public-school students in order to recruit suburbanites with higher test scores and greater cultural capital (pp. 40-41). Moreover, his final chapter details another decision by the administration to isolate engagement as a form of service rather than scholarship, thereby challenging the intellectual value of New City Writing’s own “research (such as journal articles, etc.) and research-in-practice (public-school curricula, community publications, literacy programs, etc.)” (p. 194). These changes compelled various partners invested in New City Writing to take their work “off campus” and into the “public sphere” (p. 202) by creating a nonprofit independent from the university. Through this move, the organization preserved its commitment to activism and transformed Temple into more of a “stakeholder” to be “lobbied” than a “partner” (p. 204). Yet, it remains unclear whether shifting the strategic base of community-literacy programs off campus will be sustainable over the long run, and whether such organizations will have greater power to advocate for the value of engaged scholarship within universities.

Another key issue has to do with the role of students in these progressive coalitions. Parks explains that his working-class students express a feeling of conflict between the cultures of home and school; as he puts it, they perceive “‘schooling’” as “a crucible for turning individuals against their everyday working-class values” (p. 4). He discerns as well a strong instinct for cultural analysis, arguing that students “grasp intuitively the connections between literacy and power—between who produces knowledge and who benefits from it” (p. 123). Consequently, Parks argues that his students possess an emergent desire to become involved in social change work. At the same time, however, in describing the experiences of Temple students to promote writing groups in local public schools, he notes vividly the tremendous pressure teachers put on pupils to “reframe their personal stories in terms of the American Dream” (p. 8).

Thus, Parks and his students watch as the system redirects school kids’ writing away from incipent social critique, or what Paul Willis (1977) calls *penetrations,* toward the clichés of bootstraps individualism and sentimental community nostalgia—Willis’s counterforce of *limitations.* Of course, Parks’s students generally come from these same school systems, and by the time they arrive in college, they have faced similar pressures to see themselves as individually responsible for their destinies, and hence to suppress any collective sense of injustice they may have felt growing up in these neighborhoods. However, while Parks recognizes the power of this
individualist archetype, he does not offer much detail as to where his students’ resistance to it originates.

In my own experiences teaching at a university that serves a diverse, mostly working-class population, I have found that most students—for whom the merits of individual hard work have also been continually rehearsed by school curricula, the media, and oftentimes their families—identify strongly with the ethos of the American Dream, and they rarely articulate a sense of clashing values between school and home. While I believe their capacity for political critique remains latent, students are not easily convinced that their work in the writing program and in college more generally should be tied to political advocacy. Unsurprisingly, they tend to cite career advancement as their primary reason for attending college, goals often supported by a sense of obligation to fulfill the dreams and expectations, as well as the financial investments, of their parents. Whether they self-identify as working class or not, my students overwhelmingly aspire to enter the (upper-)middle class. These observations do not in any way mean that students cannot or should not participate in the progressive coalitions that Parks calls for; in fact, they may reinforce the need for such work. Still, the prevailing individualism of the American educational system stands as a potentially significant obstacle to building and sustaining political and social change organizations—that is, if the future success of such organizations depends on the strong participation of these same college students. For progressive educators, it is important (if not crucial) to remain optimistic that such obstacles can be overcome, and though Parks does not claim credit for this, one suspects that New City Writing classrooms play a significant role in helping students actualize a politicized consciousness. Therefore, I would like to have seen Parks spend more time examining students’ various reactions to the pedagogy of writing beyond the curriculum, particularly how New City Writing works to overcome years of counter-messaging that students have been subjected to, as well as what students do following their experiences working and writing in partnership with local community groups.

In fact, perhaps the best measure of how New City Writing impacts students would be to learn about the career paths they take after graduation. Parks recounts his student writers’ transformations into “legislators” who come together “as a community of scholars working across neighborhood, institutional, and national boundaries, engaged in addressing real questions of literacy, access, and community power” (p. 129). However, he does not address the long-term implications of students’ work with New City Writing. To what extent, for example, do they remain involved with progressive organizations, either in the same communities or in other contexts, after college? In wanting to see the post-graduation stories of Park’s students, I am thinking of another organization with a mission very similar to that of New City Writing, the Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP) at the University of Michigan. PCAP, through which students facilitate writing and theater workshops in prisons, juvenile facilities, and schools throughout Michigan (Alexander, 2010), has spawned the PCAP Associates, a growing network of alumni who remain actively involved in social justice work all over the country; PCAP even publishes a bi-annual newsletter about Associates’ activities.

It also would be interesting to know what place Parks sees for middle-class students in this advocacy work. For in the wake of what Nancy Welch (2008) calls “three decades of neoliberalism’s social insecurity measures” (p. 9), and more immediately, the ongoing job losses of the Great Recession (Herbert, 2010), a college degree increasingly cannot guarantee professional security and status to students from either the working or middle classes. It is understandable that any student, when viewing her professional prospects as an individual, might consider herself at the mercy of global corporate forces. Such anxiety, to the extent that it seems to cut across traditional class lines, could potentially create opportunities, and a sense of urgency, for expanding the target membership of these progressive groups. Hence, if a broad perceptual shift occurred over the past few decades regarding the purpose of a college education, with the primary goal of “acquiring a meaningful philosophy of life” supplanted by “being very well off financially” (Bok, 2006, p. 26), then Parks’s vision might represent the beginnings of a call for another shift, one in which higher education becomes widely perceived as a source of coalition building among the working and middle classes to regain the political and economic ground they have collectively lost over those same years. Considering the trends discussed above, such a change might seem hard to imagine at this time. And yet, kindred organizations like New City Writing, the Algebra Project (Moses & Cobb, 2001), and PCAP lie at the vanguard of efforts to seed progressive activists from various socioeconomic backgrounds in communities throughout the nation. All of these alliances draw on the resources of higher educational institutions in crucial ways, and they demonstrate what might be possible if enough people come to see college as something more than an engine of individual ambition.

References


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