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Imaginative Renderings in the Service of Renewal and Reconstruction

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Our lives and our histories are constantly in the making. Though the materials of experience are established, we are poetic in our rearrangement of them.

Burke, 1935/1984, p. 218

Change agents are poets, in a Burkean sense, who give meaningful symbolic form to experiences and (re)shape possibilities. In developing his dramatic perspective, Burke (1941) used the metaphor of the parlor to describe the human condition, or what he termed the unending conversation in history. We enter the parlor on birth and encounter stories, or equipment for living, that offer cultural idioms and livable truths. Those truths give rise to partial perspectives or trained incapacities (i.e., one's training results in one's incapacities). For example, Loeb (1999) poignantly argued that in the United States we live by a meta-narrative that social movements are made by heroic individuals, moments, or uprisings. Activists are people with more time, resources, courage, vision, or insight than the average person—mythic characters who remain larger than life. Heroism does not feel like the work of ordinary human beings. Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her bus seat—a heroic and tremendously consequential moment—was preceded by 12 years of participation on her part in the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. These local, deliberate, and incremental actions represent persistent efforts to create a better world, allow for the turning points that story our collective histories, and ultimately remind us that the parlor is contested terrain. Yet, they often go unrecognized in dominant discourses of activism. We enshrine our heroes, and then fall

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short as mere mortals, defer our involvement in public affairs, and leave social change to distant but more capable others. We fail to exercise our poetic imaginations.

We glimpse similar trained incapacities in dialogues about the role of public intellectuals. In demarcating the sites and locations in which public intellectuals work, writers emphasize large-scale channels of information distribution. Visible markers of success underscore the *how many*, the *how large*, and the *how broad of reach*. For example, Brouwer and Squires (2003) argued, "Crucial to earning the status of public intellectual is the ability to find or cultivate a broad audience. Here, radio and televisual technologies play a significant role, serving as media through which the scholar disseminates ideas" (p. 204). Meanwhile, topics of national and international importance are marked as the "proper domain" of public intellectuals (see Bawer, 1998). Often cited examples include Deborah Tannen and Cornel West, those "who have moved far beyond the boundaries of their academic disciplines to write for *wide audiences* [italics added] on race and other issues" (Scott, 1994, p. B1). In this special issue, Cheney (rightly so) applauds the efforts of Kathleen Hall Jamison, and Papa and Singhal highlight the work of Noam Chomsky as they urge us to become more media savvy to bolster our public intellectual work. We also admire these scholars and others who engage international publics through mass circulation of informed discourse. Yet we feel hemmed in by images of public work that fail to acknowledge the interdependence and tensions between local and global action. It is no wonder that service remains in the shadow of other academic endeavors when it is conceived in ways that separate the locally situated and everyday moments of action from the extraordinary experiences accessible and aspired to by only a few.

There is far less media coverage for community-based organizing and scholarly outreach in one's own backyard. Yet, resistance happens in ordinary moments and in local spaces even as it occasionally spurs action across the borders of states and nations. What is missing from dialogues about the work of public intellectuals are nuanced understandings of how local and indigenous conditions and experiences can give rise to broader dialogues, movements, and social change. Without claiming universality in our scholarship and outreach, we can foster what Harding (1998) described as the *movability* of local knowledge systems—knowledge that travels and enables possibilities in contexts beyond those of its initial production. Intellectual inquiry and public work, then, are what Geertz (1983/2000) dubbed crafts of place—places from which we depart and return in our reflections. In this essay, we

offer visions of public intellectual work guided by local knowledge, or what Geertz called a “feel for immediacies” (p. 167)—the immediacies of our neighborhoods, organizations, and communities.

We have served on nonprofit boards of directors, created after-school programs for children without homes, narrated art exhibits, advocated for additional child care resources and shifts in work–family policies in university forums, organized events that celebrated the accomplishments of women across professional contexts, and facilitated public dialogues about health-related issues, including developmental disabilities in Appalachia. In rare moments, we have also written articles that reached broader lay audiences using online mediums (e.g., Harter, Norander, & Young, 2005) and popular press outlets, including newspapers (e.g., Novak & Harter, 2005). In most cases, though, we have chosen to “go deep with a few people” and have no regrets for having done so.

We feel blessed to have colleagues at Ohio University who do the same. Claudia Hale and Anita James build houses with Women Raise the Roof while simultaneously interviewing and writing about other women who volunteer with Habitat for Humanity International. Another colleague, Beth Graham, works with Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children, a nonprofit organization that assists abused and neglected children who come under the protection of the Athens County Juvenile Court. As we penned this essay, J. W. Smith was preparing a keynote presentation for a community-wide event in recognition of Disability Awareness Month.

We hope to acknowledge and inspire diverse ways of connecting our scholarly stories with the stories of people’s lives. Scholars create, modify, and sometimes discard theoretical explanations of phenomena—conceptual narratives that provide us with a vocabulary for understanding how people across time and space live their lives (Somers, 1994). Through our conceptual narratives, we can offer imaginative renderings of pressing issues, experiences, and inequities. In turn, our storied interpretations can question the consequences of inherited institutions and interpretations, give credence to alternative realities around which to organize, and encourage more edifying relations. In short, imaginative renderings can model and motivate reflexivity among our publics. We have chosen the life of the mind—conceived here as creatively writing and speaking for, about, and with others—in hopes that we can foster renewal and inspire reconstruction in our humanly fabricated worlds. In the remainder of this essay, we explore how injustice can give rise to inquiry and how inquiry can interrupt the automatic and enlarge fellow citizens’ potentialities and capacities.

Injustice Animates Inquiry

My biological mom barely graduated high school. I watched her toil at minimum-wage jobs, never to get beyond the poverty level. My father and stepmom are highly educated, a trial attorney and school superintendent, respectively. I traversed between the worlds of my mom and dad, at once experiencing the resourcefulness that comes from living in survival mode and the security that comes from social and economic advantage. I never felt truly at home in either world, and instead developed comfort and skill as a boundary spanner. I left for college determined to be a social worker, a profession of boundary spanners. I quickly realized that my gifts were not suited for such labor. While working at the Missouri State University Center for Social Research, I discovered a passion for advancing knowledge that matters. When I completed my BS in both sociology and communication, I had more questions than answers (and still do). It was both the safety and discomfort of learning that led me to graduate school. School remains a harbor of sorts for me. During my youth, I could escape the stigma and shame that too often accompany poverty in school. I could figure things out and solve problems in school. Yet learning, for me, continues to produce discomfort, the sort of anxiety that emerges when you stretch boundaries and challenge things you've come to know as true. School became a place to claim and confront marginalization—to think hard and deeply about systemic and symbolic aspects of (dis)empowerment. I remember meeting with our high school principal to advocate a change in the voucher system for free or reduced lunches. You see, I stressed, more students would use vouchers if they were the same color as cards used by those who paid full price. As I retrospectively reflect on my calling as a scholar, I recognize that the personal gave rise to the professional—and political. I continue to reside in borders, moving between identities, languages, and spaces. One foot remains in the academy, and one foot steps out.—Lynn

When I was in kindergarten, my mom and dad went in for parent-teacher conferences. With cautious trepidation, my mom raised concerns that I was not “catching onto things” like my classmates—I could not, for example, tie my shoes or spell my name. My teacher responded, “Don’t worry, Maggie is a cute girl, she will marry a doctor one day.” In retrospect, I laugh at my teacher’s words because I am the one who is going to be the doctor. Her comments, and countless others from teachers across the years, have inspired me to find within myself the ability to succeed. Because of my learning disability, and societal stigmas surrounding those marked as disabled, I have struggled with what it means to be “smart.” I admit that when I look in the mirror, I don’t see what has traditionally been thought of as a public intellectual. I do not foresee, nor do I count out, the possibility that I will speak on CNN, have a *New York Times* bestseller, or win a Nobel Peace Prize. However, in working with mentors, I’ve come to believe that my teaching and research can and

will make a difference. Drawing on my feminist sensibilities, I hope to make space for the voices of often marginalized populations in and beyond academic contexts. For example, when I introduce myself to my students on the first day of classes and as I go over the syllabus, I take an extra moment to explain that I have a learning disability and that I want everyone in class to be successful. I realize the risk that I take by “coming out” about my disability. Even so, I feel called as a public intellectual not to hide behind the messiness and the “imperfections” that I face as I figure out who I am with them. I will continue to create space for others to do the same.—Maggie

As I prepare to begin fieldwork for my dissertation, I feel both excited and humbled in knowing that the work I do carries with it a great responsibility to those who allow me to enter their lives and stories. I'll be working with a women's peace organization to understand their lived struggles with advocating for social change, and had I not had the opportunity as a graduate student to work on a long-term and field-based research project, I would not be prepared for this responsibility. Starting research from the standpoint of personal experiences and the injustices involved requires sensitivity and a keen awareness of self and others. These are practices that are best learned in practice with guidance and feedback from an experienced mentor. This mentoring has helped me create a vision of an engaged academic life and to mold my own practices as a public intellectual.—Stephanie

In part because of our personal histories, we feel summoned to make theory answerable to life—to participate in salient struggles of our time, including poverty, homelessness, and the marginalization of those living with medically diagnosed disabilities. We are not alone. Scott (1994) called on scholars to be public intellectuals who “speak with authority on a wide range of issues of the day” (p. B1). Scholars are typically granted authority by virtue of their academic positions and their development of theories that express and encompass the ideas, needs, and experiences of others. We suspect that this is the authority that Scott invokes. We offer an alternative vision: Public intellectuals bring their personal experiences and scholarly sensibilities to dialogic encounters with others so that all participants can name their worlds to change them. In light of this, we understand engaged scholarship as intersubjective efforts to offer plausible and contingent interpretations of experience.

Experience remains both the origin and the ultimate test of knowledge (Dewey, 1929/1958). Letting the subaltern identify and articulate the inequities of their worlds remains a noble pursuit for those in the academy. Participants in our research and community members at large are authorities in their own right—just as we bring unique knowledge to partnerships inspired by injustice. When injustice animates inquiry, public intellectuals invite stories that

tell truths once hidden, masked, or otherwise dismissed. Of course, narrativity is a social, communicative process that is inherently dialogic. Meaning emerges in the interface between stories or discursive fragments, not in the mind or words of any sole participant. As scholars, we collaborate with participants to endow events with meaning. We actively construct important aspects of participants' storied experience from the questions we pose to the drawing of conclusions. In poststructuralist terms, we see ourselves as co-constructing others' subject positions rather than merely soliciting or revealing their true selves (see also Weedon, 1987).

Across projects, our work has sought to identify how institutionalized narratives (e.g., gendered scripts, the biomedical model, entrepreneurialism) are normalized and disrupted in mundane interactions. We approach institutional and societal scripts as textual guides that shape and are shaped by autobiographical stories and organizational form (e.g., structures that privilege individualism at the expense of interdependence). How can structures be conceived of as narrative threads or fragments of broader discursive forms that shape and are shaped by material conditions? How do particular identities become hegemonic through routine and contested discourses? How are stories told in and through the body (i.e., embodied performances)? What lived conditions and relationships allow people to be resilient, to find the symbolic, corporeal, and material strength to survive and even thrive? These questions remain central to our scholarship, with answers that inevitably reveal contradictory experiences of agency and structure, creativity and constraint, resistance and control. Inspired by Ellingson (2005), Clair (2003), Geist-Martin (2003), and Rawlins (2003), our inquiry practices privilege the centrality of personal experience in knowledge construction, the poetics of living, and the emancipatory potential of narrative ethnography. There is artistry in identifying and interpreting meaningful actions in the ongoing activities of others. Shedding light on what is witnessed is a creative and intuitive process, as is the rendering of observations in storied accounts.

For the past 3 years, Lynn has been engaged in ethnographic fieldwork with Passion Works, a studio that fosters collaborative art among people with and without disabilities (see Harter, Scott, Novak, Leeman, & Morris, 2006). Both Stephanie and Maggie have participated as well, volunteering while observing studio interactions, interviewing participants, and analyzing trace artifacts of our fieldwork. As part of our work, we have crafted narratives based on our field notes—storied, intuitive moments that offer readers an entry into the daily workings of the studio. These narratives are being used by Passion Works on their Web site to tell “their story” of disability and

art (see www.passionworks.org) and invite visitors to consider the liberating and expressive potentials of aesthetic experiences. Stories of any sort, of course, are partial representations of acts and indeterminate as meanings shift with the exigencies of the storytelling context. We represented these storied accounts as snapshot portraits of people and places—moves in ongoing dialogues with participants who will continue to form their selves and their worlds (see also Frank, 2005). Our fieldwork has also informed the creation of a process guide to be used by other sheltered workshops interested in the programmatic use of art for creative and vocational purposes. As her fieldwork came to a close, Lynn accepted a position on the studio's board of directors. Her scholarly sensibilities and ethnographic experiences shape her contributions to discussions about product development, strategic planning and growth, and managing the paradoxes that surround the intermingling of aesthetic and instrumental sensibilities.

We would be remiss not to acknowledge the personal fulfillment we have derived through these experiences. Our lives have been enriched as a result of our encounters with the artists of Passion Works. They have taught us to embrace and celebrate the aesthetic in the ordinary moments of living, including our work as scholars. They have reminded us of the consequentiality and beauty of embodied differences, the resiliency of the human spirit, and the importance of living with gratitude and generosity. We have grieved with artists about the painful and corporeal manifestations of cerebellar spinal degeneration and other developmental disabilities and the stigma that continues to follow individuals as they move through the world in a wheelchair. We have celebrated with artists at Valentine's Day parties and other festive events and collectively mourned the loss of friends' lives at funerals. We have become less interested in criticizing and more focused on understanding and empathizing. Even so, as feminists we are committed to questioning potentially oppressive structures and practices and working with others to raise consciousness and advocate for change. Through our partnership with Passion Works, we have been able to contribute to a disability rights initiative that continues to disrupt forces that too often position those who are "different" as "less than" and "separate."

Interrupt the Automatic: Enlarge Potentialities and Capacities

The work of an intellectual is not to mold the political will of others; it is, through the analyses that he does in his own field, to re-examine evidence and

assumptions, to shake up habitual ways of working and thinking, to dissipate conventional familiarities, to re-evaluate rules and institutions. (Foucault, 1989, pp. 462-463)

A first rate test of the value of any philosophy which is offered us: Does it end in conclusions which when they are referred back to ordinary life-experiences and their predicaments, render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful?" (Dewey, 1929/1958, p. 7)

Unless deconstruction leads to progressive reconstruction and renewal, to more valuable ways of organizing experience, its potential remains unrealized. Public intellectuals ought to undo to become. Our poetic imaginations enable us to engage with the social worlds of others, defamiliarize the ordinary, break through the crusts of conventionalized and routine consciousness, and co-construct more fulfilling social orders. Too often, we remain tethered to familiar landmarks and guideposts—habits that bind us to orderly and established patterns of action. It is difficult to break with habits in part because they make associated living easier and smoother. Yet, even as traditions and rituals enable a range of expression, they involve their own entanglements. Entrenched habits, for example, can mask the role of power in solidifying experience. Drawing inspiration from Foucault, we strive to unsettle complacency—to interrupt the automatic—to enlarge citizens' potentialities and capacities.

We become the stories we know. Just as cultures offer arsenals of stories by which to live, public intellectuals can enlarge emplotments that are culturally available. For Dewey (1927/1954), publics arise because of the perceived consequentiality of acts. In Dewey's words, "the lasting, extensive and serious consequences of associated activity bring into existence a public" (p. 67). The perception of consequences of associated living that are projected in salient ways beyond those involved is the source of a public. What conditions foster the development of a responsive public? Publics take shape when unmet needs and broken scripts are acknowledged. Humans are prone to take action in response to a sense of injustice or because of the imagination's capacity to look at things as if they could be otherwise. Our creative renderings can raise consciousness, help others overcome indifference, and foster a full and free interplay of ideas that Dewey viewed as essential to communal life. From this perspective, our knowledge claims can serve as kindling for broader dialogues about which scripts to live by and, one hopes, engender the material resources needed to enact them (see critiques by Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Cheney & Cloud, 2006). One of Lynn's most memorable scholarly moments came when serving on the board of directors of the Fargo-Moorhead YWCA. Her work on the structuring of invisibility

among youth without homes led the YWCA to publicly question and reframe the “not in my backyard” discourses that threatened the relocation of its homeless shelter after a devastating flood (see Harter, Berquist, Titsworth, Novak, & Brokaw, 2005).

Lynn also recognized the liberating potential of theoretically informed and informing work when completing her dissertation under the direction of Kathy Krone. She spent months traveling across Nebraska and talking with farmers about their organizing experiences in agriculture cooperatives (see Harter, 2004; Harter & Krone, 2001). Throughout her fieldwork, the notion of “Generation-X farmers” was a metaphor that captured farmers’ fear of a younger generation less committed to organizing in cooperative ways and fixated on bottom lines and profits. At the same time, many participants identified “John Q. Public” as the archetypal character in a population that was becoming more urbanized and distant from the state’s agrarian roots. Her dissertation reinforced the need for statewide education about the role of cooperatives and led the Nebraska Cooperative Council to proactively seek out additional opportunities to engage a younger generation of farmers and the broader public. Lynn participated in two such events—first, as a keynote speaker at a ceremony celebrating cooperative month, and second, as a judge for the annual cooperative speaking competition that allowed youth to develop their communication skills while learning more about the history of farming cooperatives.

More recently, Lynn and Arvind Singhal, along with students Devendra Sharma, Saumya Pant, and Yogita Sharma, facilitated participatory theatre and participatory photography among children and youth living in rural Bihar, India (Harter, Sharma, Pant, Singhal, & Sharma, 2007). With the guidance and support of key community figures, they coordinated a week-long series of workshops that allowed more than 50 girls and boys to develop skills in script writing, character development, costume and set design, voice projection and body control, acting, and singing. We encouraged participants to create performances around social issues of importance to them, using their own words and stories. Participants then performed these self-identified plots (including issues of child marriage, dowry, and inequitable health care for women and girls) on locally fashioned stages across their home villages. In these moments, competing views of community were inscribed and enacted through cultural performances. These performances represented ensembles of narratives addressing wider economic, political, and social structures. Even so, the performances worked to reconstruct subjectivities and social orders by inserting into circulation alternative possibilities for participants’ lives. Gender and caste inequities remain deeply

entrenched and difficult to disrupt. Even so, these performances were rehearsals for change—and worked to call publics into being.

Concluding Remarks

Loss, mourning, the longing for memory, the desire to enter into the world around you and having no idea how to do it, the fear of observing too coldly or too distractedly or too raggedly, the rage of cowardice, the insight that is always arriving late, as defiant hindsight, a sense of utter uselessness of writing anything and yet the burning desire to write something, are the stopping places along the way. (Behar, 1996, p. 3)

Behar (1996) poignantly spoke to the vulnerabilities that often ensue when injustice animates inquiry. In fact, she argued that inquiry “that doesn’t break your heart just isn’t worth doing anymore” (p. 177). Not only are scholars vulnerable in the process, so too are the publics they engage. We remain thoughtful about the attained privilege that allows us to reconstruct stories in the academy and beyond. We live with legacies born out of colonizing impulses of some who came before us, including the fear of exploiting others while wanting to bear witness to their stories and inspire change. We grapple with such histories in part by beginning with community partners’ priorities rather than our own and by writing subjectivity into our imaginative renderings. We have long since given up the cloak of objectivity in favor of reflexive positionality. Following Harding’s (1998) lead, we also work to offer *a* map (not *the* map) of local terrains as drawn in particular situated moments. We have found that the most viable and plausible maps are those co-constructed in dialogic relations with members of publics of which we are a part.

In our finest moments, our inquiry engages multiple publics—disciplinary stakeholders, participants in the research process, and the communities in which we live. Yet our histories are marked by numerous failures and missed opportunities to reach beyond the few who read peer-reviewed journal articles or students in our classes. Although Ohio University understands scholarship broadly and recognizes outreach in its promotion and tenure process, the structures of the academy in general and forces in the discipline itself shift scholars’ focus to speaking primarily with each other rather than to broader publics (see Cheney). On more occasions than we can count, we have succumbed to such forces. Although we enjoy the intellectual demands of writing for ourselves and others in the academy, this forum has clarified for us our desire to prioritize community partnerships alongside theoretical contributions.

As we retrospectively take stock of our lives as scholars and cultivate ongoing possibilities, we hold onto a few beliefs. First, ideas have potency and gain traction when they spring out of and realize human activity. Second, apathy and indifference can give way to visions of things otherwise. Third, local knowledge and acts of imagination can set in motion and set the stage for broader systemic changes. Fourth and finally, truths and envisioned futures are always contingent (Rorty, 1989). Future events may very well render current knowledge claims obsolete. Nonetheless, our imaginative renderings can offer ways of addressing problems now, although one day they may seem archaic or misplaced. Ongoing vigilance is required. The work of public intellectuals, like other everyday experiences, remains subject to ongoing shifts and interpretations. The summons remains: As scholars and citizens, we are actors capable of breaking with convention and carving out new social orders in our local communities and beyond.

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