

# Chapter 5. Sinners Welcome: The Limits of Rhetorical Agency

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Prophetic pragmatism purports to be not only an oppositional cultural criticism but also a material force for individuality and democracy. By “material force” I simply mean a practice that has some potency and effect or makes a difference in the world.

– *Cornel West, The American Evasion of Philosophy*

I want to argue that we have settled for a soft vision of progressive change, a vision that at best produces a hesitant and halting trek across a neoliberal landscape eager to validate our students and our own “protestations” as a sign of rich democratic debate.<sup>1</sup>

I want to argue that the root of this failure is a compromise between the call of disciplinary identity and the need for collective politics, articulated as a nuanced theory of antifoundationalist pragmatism but which is actually a sign of the abandonment of a longer history of structurally transformative political strategies. And I want to consider whether a different path is possible.

To make this argument, I explore one generative moment in which the relationship between composition’s disciplinary identity within English studies and political action within the larger culture is both activated and distorted—the set of theories and practices that occur under the framework of “community partnerships.” Such partnerships often present themselves as articulating new strategies that can alter the local landscape in politically progressive ways for the benefit of residents and students alike (Goldblatt; Wilkey; Welch). Yet, in the effort to theorize the political impact of such work, the need to actually change the systemic exploitation of distressed communities has been elided—often justified by invoking a version of Cornel West’s prophetic pragmatism. In effect, we have turned to the social and away from the political.

It is this finessing out of the need to engage structural power relations that marks the current “grand” compromise English studies has taken toward its stated commitment to social and economic justice. In previous work, I have discussed the role of community publishing within English studies to transform how our

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field might relate to the community within our classrooms (Parks, “Strategic”). In this essay, I hope to expand this conversation outward toward our political goals as a field, offering an alternative vision, but ultimately posing the question of whether collective political action is even possible under a disciplinary rubric.

## Foundations for Agency

Linda Flower has produced one of the most articulated theories on how community partnerships can produce “social change” (16). Based on their work at the Community Literacy Center, Flower and her collaborators have crafted courses, forums, and publications that reframe public rhetoric away from “advocacy, authority, or expressiveness” and toward “inquiry” and “dialogues across difference” within local communities (6). Flower argues that these forms of rhetorical agency result in “teens, tenants, mothers, low-wage workers, and college students of community literacy tak[ing] rhetorical action not just by speaking up but by acts of engaged interpretation and public dialogue carried out in the service of personal and societal transformation” (206; emphasis in original).

Notably, Flower does not position her work as representing more than a particular practice in response to a local moment. She specifically declines to imagine her work as a national “model,” repeatedly speaking of it as a “working theory” with immediate value in its local context (91). Yet, despite such efforts to contextualize her work, Flower’s model has become an influential framework for understanding the general role of community partnerships in producing social transformation, a term Flower uses repeatedly (see Gilyard; Long; Deans). It is the very strength of Flower’s community literacy model that makes it a useful starting point to explore the basis for political action in our field.

In *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*, Flower argues that community literacy work has removed rhetoric, replacing it with a version of English studies and critical cultural theory that denies the power of the individual rhetor and that fails to provide a positive social vision. Flower believes that many of these theorists have fostered a pedagogy too focused on negative critique and too often linked to a less-than-nuanced view of community members. Relying on what she terms “popular account(s)” and “simplified forms” (195), Flower writes that such critical theory “enables us to relate to Others in an urban community as victims or at best as comrades in arms—united in a theorized battle plan (that academic intellectuals supposedly understand better than do the victims)” (115). She argues that critical theory’s narrowing reliance on foundationalist categories—such as Marxism—further mitigate against informed and subtle solutions.

Flower imagines her work as having a larger purpose. She writes, “This aspiration to engagement lays down a challenge: How can teachers and students learn to speak up and against something but also learn to speak with others (by which I mean across differences) and for something as a necessary part of literate education?” (81) Comparing the complexity of cultural critique to the solutions

offered, she continues: “Where is the parallel and equally articulated statement of a better alternative? Should we be satisfied with generalized assertions of social justice and democracy? Such undeveloped arguments sound like a monosyllable hurled at the problem when what we need is a complexly persuasive invitation to Martin Luther King Jr.’s beloved community” (116). Putting aside the broad brushstrokes with which those scholars engaged in critical theory are discussed, Flower’s primary point seems to be that critical theory emerging from English studies has framed community literacy incorrectly. Such work needs to be built on a different model, one more focused on individual agency and positive “multisyllable” dialogues.

Flower argues that such a model should be premised on a social cognitive rhetoric located within the needs of a community. Such an “intercultural rhetoric” would provide “a space for embracing difference in acts of collaborative meaning making” (99). To this end, Flower educates her students, who then work with the community, in how to understand the complexity beneath a public statement, working to build a rhetorical nuance that creates alliances among speakers at public events. Indeed, “[t]he two-way street between the university and community and between research and social action helped shape both a social cognitive theory of writing and a working theory of personal and public performance within a local intercultural public” (99). It is this rhetorical agency that Flower ultimately attempts to bring to the local community.

It is worth noting that Flower spends very little time articulating where such community dialogue might already occur. Instead, her book is full of statements implying that such spaces do not exist in Pittsburgh, such as her characterization of the “standard urban community meeting devoted to complaint and blame” (222). Perhaps it is for this reason that Flower argues that her “rhetorical agency” provides a community “a unique capacity to scaffold local public deliberation and to challenge, even reinvent that public’s expectations” (220). Notably, Flower never records if these events actually lead to a change in existing social, political, or economic policy. Instead, she argues that such an event (often with accompanying publications) “changes the social script for dialogue” (225).

Flower does not see the lack of political change as indicating a lack of “community” agency. Instead, she develops an argument based on the work of H. Richard Niebuhr and Charles Taylor that agency can be defined as the ability to make decisions in a deliberative fashion, endlessly assessing contextual factors within the framework of personal or communal values. It is this deliberative capacity, the “outward indications of an activated inner-life” (201), that her blending of cultural context and cognitive rhetoric enables community members to achieve. Agency, then, is actualized in the discussion, not in the production of systemic policy change.

But can such agency provide the necessary tools for the community to actually create that social transformation that social turn toward actual justice? If not, then what does transformation mean?

## The Limits of Rhetorical Agency

There is a troubling underside to how the field has taken up this form of rhetorical agency: an underside best framed in terms of a think-tank session, coordinated by Flower, in which residents, community elders, and business leaders discuss the difficulties caused by the then-new welfare reform legislation—legislation that required recipients to work as well as put a cap on lifetime benefits. Flower argues that the session enabled the marginalized voices of welfare recipients to gain credibility and ultimately shift the very terms of the discussion.

The welfare recipient has reframed the HR representation of *workplace* versus personal problems (in which an individual needs counseling or family help) into a more inclusive image of *worklife* problems. In her representation, the reality of inexperience, limited resources, and low-wage jobs constitutes a joint problem. One could argue that supporting *effective working lives is as essential to local economic development as it is to social justice*. (228; first and second emphasis in original; third emphasis added).

Flower concludes that the think tank “not only documents the hidden expertise and the rhetorical agency of everyday and silenced people; it asserts the possibility of a transformed understanding” (228).

What is not part of this transformed understanding, however, is a critique of a neoliberal paradigm that is shrinking federal and state support for welfare programs, instantiating private-public partnerships in its stead and moving unemployed individuals into employment at low wages, displacing current workers and depressing wages. This sense of a collective political commitment to economic justice does not fit into a discussion focused on helping one individual navigate a business context. Nor is it clear how individual agency can adequately respond to this context. The personal benevolence generated within human resources officers might alter an internal policy; it does not alter the overarching political context in which that empathy occurs.

Further, this type of political interchange among individuals misses the central attribute of power—power accedes nothing without a collective fight, a point understood by Martin Luther King Jr. when he spoke of the aforementioned creation of a “beloved community”:

The nonviolent resister must often express his protest through noncooperation or boycotts, but noncooperation and boycotts are not ends themselves; they are merely means to awaken a sense of moral shame in the opponent. The end is redemption and reconciliation. The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness.

Collective action that is designed to create an ethical and actual power-based popular movement seems the first step to the creation of such a community—of a social transformation.

Here is where West's prophetic pragmatism enters to buttress the political vision of community literacy. Flower notes that West's pragmatism connects to issues of global systemic oppression and focuses on the most oppressed by society. As argued by David Wood, however, West's conversion to prophetic pragmatism marks a step away from his more class-based Marxist work and toward what might best be called a neoliberal framework—a framework where West imagines an increased role of business in public affairs, where the problems of capitalism are framed not in terms of systemic exploitation, but in terms of management greed. As framed by Wood, West defines the work of prophetic pragmatism as the protection and expansion of the individual and individual rights—a move picked up on by Flower—where a working life framed within a reformed welfare system to support a local economy is used as a false metonym for social justice. Such think tanks, then, when generalized into a common practice, become moments of transformative space only in the sense that they attempt to ameliorate the disinvestment by the state in the public sphere; they do not, however, attempt to organize a collective sustained response to such policies.

Within such logic, transformative is always a prophetic term (pointing toward an unrealized idealized future), not a pragmatic verb detailing the current work needed to produce systemic change. Individuals come together for sponsored forums, sharing insights and possible solutions, but then disperse back to their own individual locations, with no collective actions planned, no sense of a new collective space of action as a continual resource to tackle systemic problems. Consequently, invoking Michel de Certeau, community literacy becomes embedded within the belief that negotiating with power on issues of community rights is a tactical enterprise, an attempt to claim a temporary space to make a rhetorical intervention as individuals to elite power brokers. It is not a strategic enterprise designed to reclaim the ability of the community to actually have an independent, sustainable organizational space from which to seek control of its political future.

Yet having made this critique, I understand why Flower's local work might have become a powerful national model within our discipline—why we tend to conclude with discussion instead of moving onward to collective action. As Flower notes, rhetorical agency draws on our disciplinary interests and situates us as providing avenues for marginalized individuals to gain a "voice." Such a model nicely intersects with the current neoliberal paradigm, where calls for collective action to readjust economic disparities are seen as old-fashioned (despite Occupy Wall Street) in the face of government-business partnerships designed to "empower" the poor as individuals. Having done significant work within Flower's paradigm, however, I have now come to see it as the "disciplinary compromise," which allows us to invoke the political rhetoric of a West without having to engage in traditional forms of political organizing that his insights ultimately require.

Indeed, Keith Gilyard reminds us that West's pragmatism—like much cultural theory in English studies, from Raymond Williams to Edward Said to bell hooks—should be “inextricably linked to oppositional analysis of class, race, and gender and oppositional movements for creative democracy and freedom” (13; emphasis added). Further, Gilyard argues that the recognition of the difficulty and possible failure inherent in efforts to build such a collective base of activism should not block composition scholars from taking on such work. Instead, he reinvigorates West's concept of tragicomic hope as a way to call us into the public sphere, to invest our time and labor into such struggles, and to work within the prophetic belief of better times to come.

It is to one such effort that I now turn.

## Collective Agency I

In *Home*, Syracuse's Westside residents describe their community as one rich in family, where different generations live within blocks of each other. It is a community with a deep work ethic, one initiated by Native American populations who were the original inhabitants of the area, continued by European immigrants who worked in many of the neighborhood's now-defunct factories, and currently entrusted to the recent immigrants from Latin America and Eastern Europe. Residents also describe a community facing high unemployment. There is crime, a drug trade, and the sense of a harassing police presence. Of course, police data might confirm the need for such a presence, citing the number of shots fired in the neighborhood compared to the rest of the city. Yet, the residents will tell you that such facts exist within a network of neighborhood history, social service organizations, and churches dedicated to building off this collective heritage, pointing it toward a more economically and socially secure future. The residents, that is, would see their neighborhood as a rich amalgam of contradictory narratives.

Through New City Community Press (NCCP), I had been working in the Westside for approximately two years, partnering with residents and schools on a series of community publishing projects whose goal was to create an extended community dialogue about urban life, social justice, and economic rights. Our initial theme had been “community,” sponsoring a discussion on how different generations understood the neighborhood. This project resulted in *Soul Talk* by Kristina Montero. A second publication project, *Freedom!*, focused on this concept, framing it within local and national, historical and current, contexts. Each event culminated in a public reading and discussion of these books, as well as their circulation across university and public school classrooms. These events had garnered strong support from university and foundation leaders.

The community, however, responded differently. Residents shared a belief that once a collective community-based position had been articulated, more was expected than a single event, a temporary coalition. Indeed, there had been endless “voicing projects” by faculty or community members that had produced very

little change on issues such as crime, housing, education, and unemployment. Consequently, there was a desire for a space that might unite both types of efforts (university and community), where such work could move beyond rhetorical agency toward a collective agent for change. The question became how to graft the emergent discursive space of community publishing onto emergent actions in response to changes in the neighborhood.

The concern about effective collective agency became particularly heightened as an economic reform effort came to the Westside, for as the NCCP community publications were appearing, the Near Westside Initiative (NWSI) had begun its work. NWSI was a \$54 million redevelopment effort focused on a one-square-mile area of the neighborhood, the area “nearest” to downtown. As part of a generalized effort to turn Syracuse University into an active partner in the city’s continued revitalization, NWSI had initially been funded by New York State’s forgiving of a loan to the university, with the condition that funds be used to seed such a project. This redevelopment project worked in tandem with the university’s commitment to “scholarship-in-action,” a centerpiece of our chancellor’s efforts to reframe scholarship as both an academic and a community enterprise. In addition to leveraging funds to support economic revitalization, the university also supported faculty hires, research projects, and service-learning activities across the university. For instance, I had received significant funding to support community-based initiatives with local labor unions and international writing groups, among others (see Parks, “Strategic”). The university had created NWSI as a nonprofit organization, with community resident, private foundation, local bank, and university representation providing oversight and direction. This led to a responsive attitude. After an initial survey of residents highlighted the desire to restore the crumbling factory buildings in the neighborhood, NWSI launched a campaign to turn these sites into both business and residential opportunities. Simultaneously, in partnership with Home Headquarters, a project was created to provide low-interest loans for individuals to purchase homes in the neighborhood. NWSI also sponsored a community organization, Near Westside on the Move (NWSOM), that would provide leadership opportunities for residents, eventually enabling them to take over NWSI—for the project’s stated goal was to place NWSI under the control of the neighborhood residents and partnering organizations.

Despite all of these efforts, however, some NWSI partners were concerned that the community’s collective voice was not sufficiently connected to actual policy decisions. Residents who were not in existing organizations, had not been able to attend NWSOM meetings, or felt generally disenfranchised from the community seemed to have no space through which to express their opinions. This concern produced a request for NCCP to create a project designed to support these residents’ voices. Given NCCP’s track record of building collaborative partnerships with both Westside and citywide organizations, efforts that resulted in publications and public forums, part of this work would also be to create a platform for the voices to be heard.

Then it got complicated. For although NCCP had developed a Syracuse presence, the history of the press went back to its roots in Philadelphia—where it had been involved with communities attempting to unionize immigrant workers, fight for disability rights, and broaden public school curriculum (see Parks, *Gravvyland*). Even in Syracuse, the press had been active with 1199 Service Employees International Union Bread and Roses Cultural Project on a national campaign for labor rights. And most recently, the press was part of the Undergraduate Community Research Fellows Program (UCRFP), in which students were learning how to connect academic research skills to activist campaigns.

Indeed, the Syracuse Alliance for a New Economy (SANE) had just approached UCRFP. SANE represents an alliance of labor unions in the city. Its most recent project focused on generating community benefit agreements (CBA) between developers and affected residents in Syracuse. A CBA is a legal agreement articulating how the developer will meet community concerns over the intended construction. Such an agreement had recently been signed with the school district with little or no rancor. Given that Westside residents were concerned about protecting the historical legacy and current diversity of their community, a CBA seemed to be one instrument to address those issues. For this reason, it was decided that with our resident allies, our collective resources would sponsor a project to support unorganized residents articulating their concerns and hopes for the neighborhood. Then, based on the residents' collective insights, the partners would develop a plan to support their stated goals, with the CBA being one possible vehicle.

As agreed with our NWSI-aligned partners, we would start by having UCRFP conduct door-to-door interviews, accompanied by neighborhood residents who were part of the project. The NWSI partner offered \$5,000 to pay residents for their labor. The interviews themselves occurred only after the UCRFP fellows had spent approximately six weeks learning the history of the neighborhood, forming partnerships with residents, studying the scholarship on community literacy, and receiving extensive training in such work. Simultaneous with these interviews, the project sponsored meetings concerning the nature and goals of a CBA.

Notably, although our NWSI partner had supported exploring a CBA as a possible vehicle for the Westside, support for a CBA was hardly universal. In an early meeting with NWSI to establish a collaborative relationship, the focus on a CBA was seen as unnecessary. Because the goal of NWSI would be to hand over the project to the community, the end result would be that the residents were, in effect, the “developers.” As an NWSI representative stated, “You can’t really sign an agreement with yourself, can you?” Our project was supported, however, because of previous productive partnerships that had occurred. It was within this context that the door-to-door interviews with residents occurred.

At the end of the three months, approximately sixty interviews had been conducted, and the results were presented at a community meeting with close to 100 residents in attendance, including representatives from neighborhood



organizations and NWSI. There was no “smoking gun” of discontent. Much of what was reported did not surprise residents—satisfaction with friends, neighbors; and concern over crime, unemployment. At the end of the presentation, however, several residents asked, “What happens now?” “How will these insights be supported into action?” “What is the role of the ‘press’ in continuing this work?” There were calls, that is, for continuing this new space where the residents and students acted together, but where the resident voice was primary. As a collective, we decided to pursue this idea over the summer, exploring different strategic models.

Unfortunately, this decision turned out to be deeply contentious.

## Beyond Rhetorical Agency

Flower’s work models the value of time-specific spaces for community dialogue. It is a tactical enterprise. The goals of the Westside residents were strategic. They wanted a sustained and independent space from which to organize for systemic policy changes. They wanted any organizing effort to build on the collective memory of the community as agents of change, working within their own capacity to organize, and building from their own interpretation of how the community should move forward. For that reason, community memory, not social cognitive rhetoric, was the first building block of our organizing efforts.

Richard Couto argues that the stories a community shares in the face of oppression or systemic change are a central asset to activist campaigns. These stories keep alive a tradition of values and mitigation skills that allow individual acts of resistance to be understood within a utopian vision of the community. Couto’s work reminds us that communities already have a rich legacy of intercultural resources and idealism that can be built upon to produce social transformations. For instance, in our Westside meetings, there were individuals who spoke of how they acted as unacknowledged community negotiators, trying to calm tensions between neighbors and “authorities”; others related how being a tenant organization chair taught them how to speak to power. Indeed, recognizing the neighborhood as already possessing a history of such rhetorical resources enabled a different set of strategies to emerge.

Here the work of Marshall Ganz becomes useful. His research emerges from the experience of being a community organizer with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) as well as the United Farm Workers (UFW). Based on that experience, he argues that such personal and collective stories need to be embedded within a strategic vision that builds from the values of participants, within the possibilities of their resources, to produce actual change. Ganz’s mantra is “Strategy is how we turn what we have into what we need to get what we want” (8). Much of his work concerns how individuals can develop a common agenda out of personal experiences, and then use existing skills to become part of a leadership team that supports a community achieving its collective goals.

Ganz focuses on the early career of Cesar Chavez, one of the founding members of UFW, as a central example. He cites the fact that the great majority of UFW leadership had emerged from the farmworker community. Indeed, the actual organizing work began through visiting individual farmworker houses, listening to individual stories, discovering a shared set of cultural values, and creating a collective process that resulted in UFW, an organization that Chavez understood not just as a typical union, but as a movement: “A union is not simply getting enough workers to stage a strike. A union is building a group with a spirit and existence all its own. . . . [A] union must be built around the idea that people must do things themselves, in order to help themselves” (Ganz 89). Chavez then linked the UFW rhetoric and sense of narrative to larger cultural institutions, such as the Catholic Church. In fact, the preamble to the UFW constitution invokes Pope Leo’s *Rerum Novarum*:

Rich men and masters should remember this—that to exercise pressure for the sake of gain upon the indigent and destitute, and to make one’s profit out of the need of another, is condemned by all laws, human and divine. To defraud anyone of wages that are his due is a crime which cries to the avenging anger of heaven. (qtd. in Ganz 89)

By infusing UFW’s work with such values, Chavez created a story that emerged from the local experiences of farmworkers and moved outward to larger, culturally significant narratives within the community. Ultimately, this story resulted in greater economic rights for farmworkers.

Ganz’s research also provides an argument that particular moments give enhanced power to existing community resources. He argues that the value of resources depends on the political and economic environment in which they exist:

Opportunities arise not because we acquire more resources, but because resources we have acquire more value. . . . Opportunities often occur at moments of unusual structural fluidity, such as the beginning of a project or at times of “role transition” in the lives of individuals or communities. At these moments—which combine uncertainty with significance—we have a great deal of choice and our choices have a great deal of consequences. . . . A simple victory, its occurrence may so alter the environment that prior expectations are thrown up for grabs, creating an opportunity to reconfigure the whole struggle. . . . One strategizes to turn opportunities into outcomes. (9)

As the Westside underwent a profound “transition,” the question became whether the inherent resources of previously unaffiliated or unorganized residents could be marshaled in such a way as to “turn opportunities into outcomes.” How might the creation of an independent space through which to share common stories produce such a change?

Here Chavez was additionally instructive, for he was able to connect the values and collective resources of farmworkers with an emerging opportunity to create structural change. A case in point was the 1966 UFW “march” to Sacramento, California, to highlight the group’s struggle for labor rights. UFW was engaged in an action during the growing season to compel Schenley Industries to recognize UFW and to sign a formal contract. When the growing season was over, UFW’s immediate leverage (refusing to pick crops) was diminished. Looking for a strategy to continue to apply pressure, UFW ultimately decided on a march to Sacramento, using Governor Pat Brown’s need for their votes to leverage his support. The march was also framed as a pilgrimage to be completed on Easter Sunday, tying it into Catholicism, with Catholic imagery embedded throughout the march. Clearly this strategy worked, for as is well known, by the time UFW reached Sacramento, it had won its battle, securing the first true union contract for farmworkers.

The case of UFW, then, highlights the possibility of the local Westside residents connecting their stories to their resources and using those resources to create immediate opportunities that achieve a set of concrete goals. To Ganz, these are the elements of successful strategy:

So in discussing effective strategy, I refer not a single tactic, but to a whole series of tactics through which strategies may turn short-term opportunity into long-term gain. And long-term gain is most securely won when one not only acquires more resources (higher wages, for instance), but also generates new institutional rules that govern future conflicts in ways that privilege one’s interests. (10)

The work to be done, then, was not a workshop or a forum, but a community-based strategy designed to concretely alter the rules of power. For UFW, this shift in institutional rules was the union contract. In the Westside, we thought it might be a CBA; as we would learn, however, for the Westside, it was something else entirely.

## Agency Lost

Although our project had been born within a network of support, tensions began to emerge when it became clear that there was movement toward supporting an independent, resident-controlled organization. One reason for this interest was the CBA. Early in the process, meetings were held to discuss the idea. When it became clear that not enough groundwork had been established in the community to have such a conversation, these meetings were put aside. In this sense, the CBA was off the table. The sheer fact of the conversations, however, was perceived as a direct challenge to the NWSI economic development model, appearing to position the formation of any independent resident organization as against

NWSI and NSWOM. Nonprofit and for-profit interests became concerned that our real goal was to “damage the NWSI” (personal communication). Several cited an article by one of our partners who claimed to be bringing “democracy” to the Westside. Soon after, several of our initial funders—who had ties to the university and redevelopment effort—withdraw financing because the project was “too hot.” This constellation of events frightened community members supported by NWSI who “did not want to be in the middle.” They also stepped back from the project. In fact, just prior to our first community organizing workshop, the sponsor of our original meeting place withdrew support.

Stories also circulated within the university. People who had previously supported NCCP publishing projects were now using surrogates to learn what was “happening on the ground.” Previous assessments that praised the work of our students were now dismissed as we were asked to assure individuals that the project was “pedagogically sound” and not “anti-Syracuse University.” In a very short time, the status given to NCCP for previous work had been replaced with an aura of concern and suspicion.

As Ganz might argue, such turmoil was predictable. The neighborhood was undergoing a seismic shift in power relations. Traditional identities and alliances were being restructured by the introduction of a large amount of capital into the neighborhood. In the midst of this change, any movement to organize residents acted as a further catalyst, calling into question the strength of the “new normal” as well as raising the question of who could legitimately be said to “represent” the community. Given the real stakes involved—contracts, awards, job opportunities, and so on—it is not surprising that a shift from achieving rhetorical agency to securing collective agency would produce such a response. The question became how to strategize collectively to move a plan forward. And it is within this context, then, that what were informally called “Ganz” workshops occurred.

Ganz had developed a two-day workshop that facilitated community members using their individual and communal experiences to develop a collective agenda for action. The workshops were designed to draw out the values and resources in a community, providing a space for developing a strategy for shifting institutional power in favor of a community’s collective goals. Here it is important to note that compared to Flower, Ganz positioned the community participant in a much different position. Ganz’s method seems to operate on the belief that for social transformation to occur, more is required than public forums. For change to occur and be maintained, an independent, community-led organization is required. That is, any rhetorical agency must be supported by the consistent application of pressure from the community. (To view Ganz’s full project, see [www.hks.harvard.edu/organizing](http://www.hks.harvard.edu/organizing))

At the end of the workshops, then, residents proposed the development of a new grassroots independent organization, the Westside Residents Coalition (WRC), a name that spoke to an inclusive and traditional sense of the neighborhood. WRC would also be democratically controlled by residents but would work

to foster dialogue between nonaffiliated residents as well as among different non-profit, economic development, and religious organizations. The WRC mission statement speaks to these goals:

The Westside Residents Coalition (WRC) is a culturally diverse, resident-based coalition of individuals and organizations that seeks to listen and give voice to, represent and advocate for, residents who live in the area bounded primarily by West St., W. Onondaga St., Bellevue Ave., W. Fayette St., and S. Geddes St. WRC will move beyond this area as the coalition develops. We seek to do so inspired by the values of love, mutual respect, integrity, inclusion, democratic decision-making, and shared leadership. We expect that the WRC will work for the betterment of our neighborhood through coming together, outreach, coalition building and advocacy around issues of interest to residents such as empowering and educating youth, improving neighborhood environment, increasing safety, improving access to job training and opportunities, achieving housing fairness, working towards economic justice, and improving information about all these matters.

Finally, instead of a singular call for a CBA, WRC cited housing, crime, and jobs as its areas of focus. The mission statement, then, claims a grassroots identity while also reaching outward to different organizations and constituencies in the neighborhood. WRC was a coalition, not a vanguard party (to invoke Flower's concern about critical theory ideologues).

The atmosphere surrounding WRC, however, was still stifling. Several members aligned with previously existing groups soon stopped attending meetings. Others expressed concerns that they needed to choose between WRC and NWSOM—a position never endorsed or supported by the NWSI or NWSOM leadership, who had remained engaged throughout the process. The fact that Syracuse University and SANE were involved also led to concerns that WRC was not truly independent. Instead of being seen as a grassroots organization dedicated to speaking for productive change in the neighborhood, it was being portrayed as an obstacle to such progress. WRC was wrapped in a set of narratives that it could not control.

At this moment, Ganz's insight about resources becomes relevant—“Opportunities arise not because we acquire more resources, but because resources we have acquire more value” (9). For despite all the attempts to weaken the WRC, one primary resource at its disposal remained untouched: WRC was run by residents, individuals known in the community. This resource gained increased power at a moment when the neighborhood was undergoing a profound transition by “outside forces.” There was an opening for WRC to claim an authenticity in representing and advocating for the neighborhood. With this in mind, WRC decided to hold a picnic—a reiteration and revision of Flower's public forums.

WRC recognized that the community wanted increased opportunities to come together, share stories, and talk about neighborhood issues. WRC also recognized a picnic as a chance to demonstrate how WRC was directed by residents. For this reason, all elements of the picnic were organized and decided on by the WRC members. Given the organization's lack of funding, many of the aspects of the picnic (food, games, and so on) were donated by members or provided at discount by local organizations. The sheer act of residents going to local sites to ask for support, cooking much of the food that would be served, and appearing as lead figures throughout the day demonstrated the grassroots nature of WRC. Moreover, the picnic featured an open mic for residents to express their thoughts about the neighborhood. Community, nonprofit, and political leaders were also invited to speak, with service organizations also being given time to talk about their mission in the community.

This is not to say that NCCP, SANE, and Syracuse University students suddenly absented themselves. The goal was to create a common collaborative space. For this reason, SANE paid for the insurance required to host the picnic in a local park, students worked different booths at the event, and NCCP helped to record resident opinions. John Burdick and I also met with university and nonprofit leadership to reframe the goals of the project—alleviating concerns and accepting responsibility for any missteps along the way. Moving tables, chairs, food, barbeques, and other heavy lifting was also part of the partnership work.

I suppose we became the comrade in arms about which Flower expresses such concern, but with one key difference. As noncommunity partners, we did not broker relationships for WRC to make the picnic happen; we did not leverage our assets to assure the event would occur. Instead, we were in the role of partner—suggesting ideas, carrying tables, being part of the effort, but ultimately being led by the WRC members. Notably, the picnic attracted over 200 residents. As a result of this work, WRC was rebranded as “neighborhood based,” drawing in new members and reestablishing old partnerships.

## Agency Found

The newfound power of WRC became evident when the Syracuse Police Department decided to use antiterrorist funds to put surveillance cameras into the neighborhood to “deter crime.” The Westside residents were very divided about the cameras. WRC chose not to take a stand, arguing instead that the real issue was community policing. Cameras were not the only, or even necessarily the best, solution to relations between the police and community. In this stance, WRC found itself aligned with NWSI, which was concerned with how such cameras would be perceived by the businesses and residents being recruited into the neighborhood. From different positions, WRC, NWSI, and other organizations were able to come together to advocate for better police practices.

The result of this alliance was not, however, the removal of the cameras. In a meeting with the mayor, the “fact of the cameras” was not even discussed. Instead, the alliance led to the creation of a police delegation, which meets monthly to discuss the interactions between officers and residents. Consisting of WRC, NWSI, and the deputy of police, the delegation discusses how to improve the policing as well as specific incidents that have occurred. As a result, residents report improved police behavior, less harassment, more cooperation, and greater access to police officials. As noted earlier, Ganz contends that “long-term gain is most securely won when one not only acquires more resources (higher wages, for instance), but also generates new institutional rules that govern future conflicts in ways that privilege one’s interests.” Such is the hoped-for future of the police delegation activities.

This story ultimately leads back to the community publishing efforts that initiated working in the Westside years before. For it would be simplistic to portray WRC as now completely accepted by all constituencies. Coalitions change constantly; progressive change means constantly engaging with power, constantly retelling and revising a collective vision for the neighborhood. Yet having experienced losing control of its own narrative, its identity, WRC moved to create its own community publishing house, Gifford Street Community Press (GSCP). Here the goal is to be able to consistently represent community voices, on their own terms, ensuring a consistent presence in public discussions about the neighborhood.

The press has already published two books, *Home* and *I Witness*, the latter edited by Ben Kuebrich.<sup>2</sup> A new book focused on an advocacy campaign against absentee landlords has just been completed. In each case, these projects were part of the continued effort to develop a mutually cooperative space between WRC and the Syracuse Writing Program. Indeed, most recently, the university has agreed to fund the publications of GSCP for five years. Community publishing, that is, has become intertwined within a partnership focused on fostering systemic change. These publications, which help to frame the goals and needs of the neighborhood, circulate within an activist community and activist campaigns. Initially the site of controversy and opposition, the residents who created WRC have “flipped the script,” generating a collaborative space from which the collective neighborhood voice can be heard and the rules of power can be altered in their favor.

## Sinners Welcome in the Afterlife

In the heart of the Westside rests St. Lucy’s Church. Across its primary entrance hangs a banner, “Sinners Welcome.” It was a banner that I thought about often in the midst of the summer crisis and counterresponse. Yet through the difficult work

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2. For a detailed account of the production of *I Witness* as well as the implications of such work for community partnership work, see “White Guys Who Send My Uncle to Prison,” by Ben Kuebrich, who was a vital part of all the work described here.

of building and then rebuilding alliances, confronting rumor with fact, and working through division toward collaboration, the banner has taken on particular resonance for me: it has come to symbolize a promise of working toward the “beloved community” invoked by King, an implicit understanding that any one moment of conflict, of failure, needs to be understood within a larger utopian vision.

I am arguing for a utopian vision for our field, one that transgresses our currently accepted compromises. It is a vision that moves beyond a sense of agency as rhetorical, as something used to sponsor a circulation of dialogue, to a sense of agency as change, as something that redistributes how power and resources are distributed. And I want to argue that English studies should take on the work of such collective political action—expanding the scope of Linda Adler-Kassner’s recent call for an activist writing program administrator (WPA) to the idea of an activist English department. I do this not only out of recognition of our field’s engagement with the progressive social movements of the 1960s and 1970s (see Blackmon, Kirklighter, and Parks), but also because if we take seriously our increasing adoption of “prophetic pragmatism,” then such work must necessarily follow.

Prophetic pragmatism has been framed as the production of rhetorically savvy individuals, negotiating with elite power brokers, within a narrowly defined political set of goals. Some might differ on whether this set of goals is neoliberalism, but few can deny that the actual work of creating wholesale systemic change for the benefit of oppressed communities has failed to be at the forefront of conversation. Yet as Gilyard reminds us, above all else, West is a philosopher activist, deeply concerned not only with creating democratic conversations, but with economic democracy on a local and global scale. West asks us to “dream big,” recognizing that there is no dignity lost and much honor to be gained in such continued efforts. It is, perhaps for this reason, that he asks us to imagine a tragicomic aspiration for our work—a call for endlessly moving and working to shift power, endlessly recovering and renewing our effort at each sign of failure.

And to undertake this work, I would argue that we must move beyond a volunteerist ethos, where individual students learn to understand the power of their individual rhetorical agency in the context of temporary forums, and move toward a collective voice, premised on coming to understand how community histories can act as the foundational moment for strategic interventions in power networks. Rather than seeing such work as outside of our disciplinary parameters, I would argue that gaining this understanding draws on the very meaning of “community partnerships” the belief that a collective appeal to common values is a primary way to understand a neighborhood, a region, or a nation. It is this spirit, I believe, that West was trying to call forth when speaking of a prophetic pragmatism—the attempt to overreach current political boundaries within an understanding of the endless need to assess and renew our efforts.

I recognize that such a focus takes us outside of our current disciplinary paradigm toward what many might consider to be overtly political work. I also recognize that Ganz’s rhetorical positioning of student and community members as



advocates, as members of a campaign, touches on deep issues of our role as teachers. But I would also ask this: If we embed our work within a prophetic pragmatism without engaging students in such collective politics, what are we teaching them about community? If they never experience the direct struggle to build community agency, work within and against power structures, and see the nuanced literacy that has to result, what have they learned about the nature of power and language? If students are not involved in a strategic understanding of community, what can we actually be said to be teaching about community literacy? About the goals of cultural theory? For these reasons, perhaps a focus on how English studies can work within the grassroots activism for community justice needs to become part of our curriculum. Perhaps we need to move beyond the social and toward the political.<sup>3</sup>

I understand that such work does not characterize discussions of community literacy and partnership at this time—that the field has taken a different direction in its definition of the political. I want to end, then, with the hope that the Westside, however problematic an example, is not an isolated incident—that as the decade continues, we will embrace the need to move our field outward toward community struggles and engage our students in the collective work of community building, of working with neighborhoods to use their memories as a resource for building a vision of a utopian future, working collaboratively to link existing resources with that vision, and shifting the networks of power to ensure, at long last, that the playing field is tilted in favor of the oppressed. This prophecy is one worthy of our ambitions.

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3. In arguing for a "political turn," I am invoking the emergent work of my colleagues, Shannon Carter, Deborah Mutnick, and Ben Kuebrich.

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