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## **“White Guys Who Send My Uncle to Prison”: Going Public within Asymmetrical Power**

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Examining the context and production of a community publication, *I Witness: Perspectives on Policing in the Near Westside*, this essay analyzes the ways in which local neighborhood authors situate themselves rhetorically when engaging with police issues within conditions of asymmetrical power. Furthermore, it describes the collective processes neighborhood residents used to empower their perspectives. The essay applies this case study to debates over open-hand and closed-fist rhetorics and the roles of scholars as sponsors to such rhetorical forms.

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*The law, the judges, the court system, the people around here  
look at them as white guys who send my uncle to prison. That's  
what authority is.*

—Gary Bonaparte, “On These Streets”

*It is clear that the frontier between the public and the hidden  
transcripts is a zone of constant struggle between dominant and  
subordinate—not a solid wall. . . The unremitting struggle over  
such boundaries is perhaps the most vital arena for ordinary  
conflict, for everyday forms of class struggle.*

—James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*

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**Foreword<sup>1</sup>**

**I**t is December 5, 2014, and I can't think of *public*, *power*, or *police* without replaying the squad car sliding onto the lawn of a Cleveland park—and the police not even stopping the car, much less speaking to twelve-year-old Tamir Rice.

Without reenacting the violence, it feels imperative to remind us all of what is at stake. The urgency of the moment is expressed in some of Eric Garner's final words: "It stops today." Nearly sixty years after Emmett Till's murder, we still have to march in the streets and tell people that Black Lives Matter.

I won't presume that in sixty years of composition scholarship or 2,500 years of Western rhetorical traditions there is an answer. Today I'm wondering: What good is rhetoric when Tamir Rice wasn't given a second to speak?

And yet those of us who teach, and whose job it is to challenge commonplace narratives, have a responsibility. Without a national culture and history filled with racist narratives and rhetorics, perhaps Darren Wilson wouldn't so easily see Michael Brown as a "demon" that he needed to kill. To counter these narratives will require developing an analysis that is not separate from a critical view of history and an understanding of power relations. And we will need to think about our roles as not just writing or teaching about social movements but directly supporting, joining, and building them.

As I began working on a community publication about policing in Syracuse's Westside, I heard stories similar to those we've heard so frequently in the past year: "People say they beat Raul to death. I'm sure he wasn't a perfect person, but there's this whole injustice of an organization with members who can assault people, who can terrorize people and get away with it and never have to answer to anybody" (Bonaparte 124).

Raul Pinet Jr., a resident of Syracuse's Westside, was killed by jail guards. He was a husband, a brother, and a son. As he was thrown into a police van, witnesses say that he yelled, "I don't want to die!" Like Michael Brown and Eric Garner, he was unarmed. Like the police that killed Michael Brown and Eric Garner, none of the jail guards were charged. Pinet Jr. was killed without a trial, and the people that killed him never went to trial.

This happened in 2010. The book project I describe in these pages started in 2011 and was released in 2012. In 2013, I submitted the first draft of this article. Throughout these years also runs a heinous timeline accounted for with lost lives. So while I think this article is important for its attempts to describe the work of neighborhood residents who, in the context of police abuses, are

building power through the connection of community publishing and community organizing, this article was not written for the current moment. I don't know how to write for this moment.

I offer these stories humbly and in solidarity with the current movement and the movements to come.

## Introduction

Cops, historically, have been a problem for composition. Police brutality against protesters at the 1968 Democratic National Convention, for example, prompted the CCCC Executive Committee to move the annual convention from Chicago to St. Louis, a “gesture” meant to express our field’s opposition to “the language of the nightstick” (“Secretary’s Report” 270). While this move is consistent with the field’s ongoing ethical stances and may have had some minor economic impact, its effectiveness and justification has been questioned<sup>2</sup>. In “Corbett’s Hand: A Rhetorical Figure for Composition Studies,” Richard Marback describes how the Executive Committee’s stated concern focused narrowly on “society’s expression of values” and did not clearly distinguish between protesters and police or their different access to and relationship with established power (190). Marback argues that the Executive Committee’s commitment to civil rhetoric (what Edward P. J. Corbett calls “the open hand” as opposed to the “closed fist”) allowed representatives of the discipline to remove the conference from the site of injustice and call for a more “just language,” but the committee could do little else to engage with the authoritarian violence of the police or the popular outrage of protesters (Marback 190–91). Using this example, Marback argues that such “civil rhetoric” can function “only by differentiating and excluding itself . . . creating a distance from police violence and disenfranchised groups” (191).

Of course, our field’s identity has shifted since then, perhaps moving us closer to scholarship, pedagogies, and community-university partnerships situated to address social conflicts and work alongside disenfranchised groups. While Marback described the problems of addressing issues in the streets of Chicago with classroom rhetoric in the late 1960s, Paula Mathieu opens up her 2005 *Tactics of Hope* by asserting that “[c]omposition is hitting the streets and has been for some time now” (1). With this decades-long public orientation, is the discipline any better equipped to deal with contentious realities like police violence, either when police endanger professors (see Laymon; “NCTE”), our students (see Jordan; Wells), or our local communities? If the field views rhetoric and literacy as a means to social change, how do our choices—how we spon-

sor students and community members, participate in relevant rhetorics, and provide resources—position our discipline to address the most fundamental abuses of power?

Addressing similar questions, Nancy Welch emphasizes the importance of social movement and activist rhetoric, arguing that rhetorical scholars and compositionists must engage with “the history of the rhetorical means that have won social change” (“Informed” 46). Studying these histories can lead to more informed partnerships in community literacy, which, from its introduction as a concept and practice in the field, has named social change as a goal (Peck, Flower, and Higgins 205). While there is disagreement on the various methods of intervening, sponsoring, and partnering with community residents who face asymmetrical power (as I address below), some scholars have begun arguing for more direct participation in local social movements. In the introduction to a recent special issue in *Community Literacy Journal*, Shannon Carter and Deborah Mutnick describe the need for a “political turn” in composition, “joining forces with local communities and emerging social movements, and supporting their efforts to rebuild and retool for a more equitable, just, democratic, environmentally sustainable society” (7). This placement alongside community-driven struggles allows for a richer understanding of local power dynamics and the diverse rhetorical forms used to win rights, resources, and respect.

As the field begins thinking about a more directly engaged role for composition, this article offers a case study on community publishing by working within a local, resident-driven campaign to improve community policing. Through the case study, I illustrate how neighborhood residents negotiate power asymmetries and build networks and organizations that gain enough support to take critical rhetorical positions in public. To analyze these social processes and rhetorics, I use anthropologist James C. Scott’s work on the public and hidden transcript. The public transcript is defined as the discourse that takes place when people in asymmetrical power relations have a public interaction. Because of the power relations that build and maintain the public transcript, it often becomes “the *self*-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen” (*Domination* 18). The hidden transcript, by contrast, is the “discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by power-

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holders” (4). I use this critical lens, which Ellen Cushman also applies in *The Struggle and the Tools*, as a way of developing a more nuanced sense of public spaces and rhetorics in relation to local power dynamics. For example, the epigraph from long-time resident Gary Bonaparte can be described as a hidden, critical discourse that has gone public. Through his section of *I Witness*, Bonaparte addresses commonly held perceptions of local residents that push the boundaries of acceptable public discourse on police and other power holders in the “criminal justice” system by renaming them “white guys who send my uncle to prison” (127).

*I Witness* includes the testimony of Bonaparte, six other neighborhood residents, three community partners, and three officers that police Syracuse’s Near Westside, a neighborhood with 50 percent of its residents living in poverty and a history of tense police encounters. The book is the second publication of the Gifford Street Community Press (GSCP), a press built in partnership with residents in the Westside and the Writing Program at Syracuse University. The press also has an important relationship with the Westside Residents Coalition (WRC), which emerged from a community-university partnership and from the stated goals of neighborhood residents for a resident-driven community organization. Through a graduate course taught by Steve Parks, I participated in the early formation of the GSCP and began attending regular WRC meetings.<sup>3</sup> As the WRC began taking on police issues in the neighborhood, the GSCP board decided a book on policing might help local organizing, and they offered me the opportunity to collect stories and edit the book.

Looking at the emergence of *I Witness*, I treat it not as a static text but as an example of public rhetoric and critical literacy situated within the context of local community organizing. I write in the hopes that this case study will build on and respond to scholars in community literacy whose work often suggests that public, community voices can achieve local social change (Flower; Peck, Flower, and Higgins; Long; Mathieu; Parks). To that end, I ask: Under what conditions do Westside residents speak out against injustice? What rhetorics result from grassroots community organizing on contentious social issues? And how might the social process of a community publication be informative to students and scholars who sponsor and promote resident voices?

### **“They Were Not Happy”: Residents Respond to Police**

The Westside Residents Coalition was created under the banner of resident empowerment around housing, employment, safety, and education in the

summer of 2010 (“Mission”). That fall, when the Syracuse Police Department announced plans to install surveillance cameras on nine corners in the Westside (Knauss), the WRC’s broad goals of resident empowerment found an urgent, specific issue. The result of a Homeland Security grant, these cameras would tape the neighborhood nonstop through high-definition lenses, an imposition that upset many community residents (“Syracuse PD”). Describing the cameras as a “done deal” before neighborhood residents were offered a chance to respond (Jacobs 71), Syracuse Police deputy chief Barrette attempted to persuade community residents at the local Boys and Girls Club on October 14. “That’s when [the police] learned they had made a mistake,” says Maarten Jacobs, the director of a community development corporation and moderator of the meeting: “People showed up, people were pissed off. There were probably eighty people there, and they were not happy” (71). While neighborhood residents were split on whether or not the cameras would effectively deter crime, the fact that no one had consulted them was another reminder of the city’s disrespect for the Westside. Furthermore, the cameras were framed as an experiment in local law enforcement. That the Westside was the determined testing ground reinforced a feeling among many residents that they were considered criminals by default—part of a public transcript that residents could not control (Mother Earth 29–31; Hunter 43; Burdick 50–54). The police cameras added to a growing list of concerns and abuses in the neighborhood, from micro-aggression targeted at young men of color (Hunter 43), to police not stopping at stop signs (Burdick 54; Jacobs 79; Curran 93), to brutality that led to the death of at least one neighborhood resident in recent years (Bonaparte 124; “In the Matter”)<sup>4</sup>. The omission of resident perspectives in the decision speaks to the power asymmetries between neighborhood residents and the city.

WRC members attended the October meeting with police to ask questions and report back to the organization. Meeting minutes from this period show that while there was no consensus to support or oppose the cameras, there was agreement that policing could be improved and that the relationship between residents and police had been toxic for some time. In an interview for *I Witness*, Deputy Chief Barrette also recognized that things got “hot” in the October meeting because the cameras were emblematic of growing tensions between the community and the police (60). In response to criticism of local policing, Barrette offered to meet with residents if they formed a group. The WRC decided to join the Westside Police Delegation, a tactical choice made in a particular moment of organizing.

As the Delegation had its first meetings, the Gifford Street Community Press started considering neighborhood policing for a book. The GSCP aims to “support conversation and to build relationships, which will foster greater civic awareness of local issues and when necessary, support resident driven change in the neighborhood” (“Mission”). The resident-led editorial board decided that a book of interviews and stories, starting with members of the Delegation, might help achieve greater communication and accountability. They asked me to start with a list of residents and then officers to interview and from whom to collect narratives. Through hours of transcription and several rounds of edits with contributors and the editorial board, the publication slowly formed.

### **“Because of Power”**

Elenore Long, in a survey of the last twenty years of community literacy, finds that the common work of these projects and models is that they “stand to make a difference by using [community members’ and scholars’] literate repertoires to *go public*” (4, emphasis in original). Much scholarship in community literacy has valorized the practice of “speaking out” or “going public,” often as end goals. In this section, I look at *I Witness* and scholarship on the hidden and public transcript to describe not only the texts and voices that go public, but also the power relations they enter, form out of, and aim to change.

Steve Parks, in a conversation with Nick Pollard about community publishing, explains his view of the community writer: “I try to invoke Gramsci’s idea that they are organic intellectuals—people who understand their social and political location and have a responsibility to speak out in support of their community’s local rights” (Parks and Pollard 58). Parks describes a community writer who is critically conscious of his or her position in relation to power. This is a view confirmed through my own experiences in the Westside and one that builds on Scott’s work on hidden transcripts. Scott’s descriptions of the hidden transcript work against notions of “false consciousness,” a theory that some scholars and activists use to describe why, despite consistently oppressive conditions around the world and in local communities, there have not been more unified movements to create just and egalitarian societies. The strong version of false consciousness claims that many marginalized, working-class, or oppressed groups actively value the ideologies and narratives that “justify their own subordination” (Scott, *Domination* 72). However, Scott’s work on the hidden transcript explores it as a discourse that is critical of power holders and dominant social systems, demonstrating that subordinates (Scott’s

term) are often aware of the people and systems that constrain them and often imagine the social system turned upside down, even if this understanding is often not made public (80). Ellen Cushman, applying Scott's notion of the hidden transcript to her ethnography of Quayville, also finds that "inner city residents perceive the mechanisms that sustain . . . asymmetrical relations" (239). That is, the hidden transcripts of community residents often prove that they "understand their social and political location," as Parks notes (Parks and Pollard 58).

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However, this critical consciousness does not always translate to a resident deciding to "speak out in support of their community's local rights" (Parks and Pollard 58). The move from critical consciousness to publication or public speech is often risky and always embedded in complex networks of power. The absence of local rights is hardly ever the result of benign oversight; it is often by the design of outside forces, driven through government programs (or the lack thereof), economic policy, and historical and institutional oppressions. In this context, to speak out is often to speak out against someone or something, and the ability to speak out is not separate from other rights. The work of Scott and Cushman shows that the public transcript is policed because power is not just about physical domination or access to resources and wealth, but also about controlling public representation, which is central to the preservation of dominance and subordination.

The relationship between public speech and power becomes clear in application of Scott's notion of the public transcript, the "open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate" that often fulfills the "expectations of the powerful" and creates the "dramatization of hierarchy" (*Domination* 2, 60). Through ethnographic study in Malaysia (*Weapons of the Weak*) and surveys of other peasant and oppressed peoples' struggles (*Domination*), Scott describes how rare it is for subordinates to speak out publicly with their analysis of unjust social conditions. Similarly, through rational assessments of power, the residents in Cushman's study find moments for "linguistic strategizing" instead of overt challenges to power (167).

Within this context of asymmetrical power, sponsoring resident writing to "go public" can involve turning their hidden, often critical and thus risky discourse into published texts. In *I Witness*, Mother Earth, an African American woman, poet, and grassroots community leader, helps illustrate power



relations with police in the Westside, a starting point for thinking about the specific context that *I Witness* enters. Discussing the police's response to public criticism in her chapter, Mother Earth says:

I don't think they care. I don't think they care because of power. So it's like—I got the power right now, so I don't care what you do, what you done heard, I got the juice. So it don't matter. And there's nothing you can really do to bring that to the forefront because I got so many people on my squad there to protect and serve me first . . . You might shout it out when they pull up: "ya'll ain't this, ya'll ain't that, you all corrupt." But that leaves you wide open, because it don't matter what you say, and if you say too much you're going to be in the back seat of the car. (26)

In this excerpt, Mother Earth describes the power held over the hidden transcript—the physical removal and constraint through which critical speech about police is kept from the public. Speaking out in this situation, an individual act, is both ineffective ("it don't matter") and can end with the speaker "in the back seat of the car." In contrast to the idea that critical consciousness leads to speaking out, it is precisely Mother Earth's understanding of her social and political location that leads her to the conclusion that speaking out is a pointless exercise in the described conditions. Even if she or other residents view police power as illegitimate or corrupt, individual formal and informal complaints go through the same channels of power that bring those police to her street; they form part of "the squad" that protects themselves above city residents. Given Mother Earth's analysis about the constraints of public speech on policing, it is worth stating the obvious: critiques of police from residents like Mother Earth and Gary Bonaparte are no longer hidden in the Westside. These critiques are published by the Gifford Street Community Press, of which Mother Earth and Bonaparte are editorial board members. Despite the constraining circumstances and asymmetrical power relations, they consciously chose to speak out in support of their community's rights. Why?

The clearest answer is that Mother Earth and Bonaparte are both part of organizations in which their voices are not singular—groups like the WRC, the GSCP, and the Westside Police Delegation that have gained enough power, visibility, and credibility in the neighborhood to protect, amplify, and authorize their viewpoints. For scholars in community publishing and community literacy to "confront power dynamics and political systems," a possibility evoked by Mathieu, Parks, and Tiffany Rousculp in the introduction to *Circulating Communities* (2–3), they must take part in the political turn in composition—working with emerging social movements and local campaigns that build collective

power. To build these mutually beneficial relationships in which the interests and perspectives of community members are expressed and worked toward, scholars can follow Eli Goldblatt's advice and "think like organizers rather than academics when we devise models of university-community relations" (282). To this end, Goldblatt cites Saul Alinsky to explain the basic process of community organizing: "change comes from power, and power comes from organization. In order to act, people must get together" (qtd. in Goldblatt 281). Change, of course, can also come through civil rhetoric, community think tanks, and negotiation, but only when the people at the table are relatively equal power holders or when an organized group presents a credible threat to established power. But for community literacy to be relevant to community residents who face numerous intersections of inequality, we first have to understand that "good arguments alone are seldom a match against political and economic might," as Nancy Welch demonstrates in an article on working-class rhetorical traditions ("We're Here" 222). Scholars such as Goldblatt and Welch point to new directions for community literacy with historically informed theories of social change that understand both the uses and limits of composition and rhetoric's current models of engagement. In the next section, I look more closely at two such models, comparing them to the process of community organizing and community publishing out of which *I Witness* emerged.

### **Models for Partnership, Inquiry, and Organizing**

While composition has been engaged in community literacy and partnership work for the last twenty-five years, debate continues on the sorts of rhetoric to sponsor and, relatedly, the role of scholars in communities. One commonly cited model of community literacy stems from the work of Linda Flower and her colleagues at the Community Literacy Center (CLC) in Pittsburgh. Driven by the process of inquiry, the CLC imagines long-term knowledge transformation of individuals and an enlightened public discussion on community problems, but it differentiates itself from social movements or organizations that work for specific ends. As Flower describes, "Inquiry in community literacy differs from community organizing, direct political action, or instruction in that it does not target a specific outcome" (*Community* 59). Instead, this work builds toward a "hybrid discourse" and an "alternative space of engagement," distinct from both university spaces and the sorts of community organizations already active in a neighborhood (183, 223). Elenore Long describes the CLC as built specifically "as a response to the frustrations Pittsburgh residents have voiced

with community-organizing practices” (Long 10). The CLC’s inquiry-based work is also written as a response to the norms of community discussion. In “Intercultural Knowledge Building,” Flower writes:

Because they speak from a marginalized position, urban teenagers, neighborhood advocates, and the poor often resort to a rhetoric of complaint and blame—a vigorous rehearsal of the wrongs by others in a context they (the speakers) do not control. Standing out of power, the discourse of complaint and blame takes little responsibility for positive change; it finds its strength in pressure, exposure, disruption and advocacy (250).

In this model, critical, closed-fisted rhetoric is a problem to be solved, characterized as an ineffective and inappropriate response to the power asymmetries faced by the communities that Flower works with. Instead, Flower and the CLC aim to teach youth in the community “a new strategy for civil discourse and inquiry” that will give them access and agency in the discourse of adults and those who have established power inside and outside of the community (*Community* 177).

In response to the community think-tank, inquiry-based model proposed by Flower and her colleagues, Christopher Wilkey calls for practitioners of community literacy to “align our work with social movements and use literacy and rhetoric to advance distinct causes” (27), a vision very similar to Carter and Mutnick’s call for a political turn in composition. Building from the critical rhetoric existing in local communities, Wilkey rewrites the closed-fist/open-hand debate to talk about the “interaction between fist and hand,” acknowledging the uses of both critical public assertions and hopeful, collaborative work among participants within social movements (47). Similarly, in “Sinners Welcome,” Parks argues that community partnership that aspires to social change must follow through on a strategy of collective action instead of stopping at discussion, inquiry, and individual rhetorical agency (511). Parks and Wilkey help to illustrate a vision for community partnership that would look at a situation in which residents or teenagers are “standing out of power” as the problem, not the rhetorical forms that may at times accompany these social positions. Rhetorical forms would be best judged on how well they lead to productive, collective action that might alter existing power dynamics and social structures, not how they align with prescriptive notions of civility and propriety.

Work with local social movements necessitates taking stock of the “rhetorical resources” and analyses of power that already exist in communities and

within community organizations (Parks, “Sinners” 515). Describing the process toward public rhetoric in activist and politically subversive communities, Scott asserts that the hidden transcript is spoken in spaces “insulated from surveillance and control from above,” spaces used for the “socialization of resistant practices and discourses” that also “serve to discipline as well as formulate patterns of resistance” (118–19). Through this understanding of resistant rhetorical formation, it is easy to see how community organizations can become spaces for organic inquiry as well as the creation and assessment of tactically resistant rhetorics. While a hidden transcript may start off as a “rehearsal of the wrongs” committed against community members (Flower, “Intercultural” 250), the localized publics of the hidden transcript can also become places where formerly unarticulated anger over injustice is revised through internal groups, slowly expanding into other publics that further develop the emerging discourse (Scott, *Domination* 119). Scott and Cushman both provide examples of this process happening without explicit rhetorical education from outsiders. Instead, in the context of local struggles, people can figure out collectively how to shape their rhetorics in ways that win them rights, resources, and respect.

Meetings of the Westside Residents Coalition also illustrate this process. Weekly minutes from October 4 to December 13, 2010, show a careful discussion of the proposed surveillance cameras, the police, and the various stakeholders and decision makers in the neighborhood. WRC members talked with police, engaged with other neighborhood organizations, collected and distributed research, and reached out to friends and family. There were moments of anger, complaint, and blame, but there was also an organic process of community-based inquiry in which they came to a careful decision on how to respond to the cameras. This process also allowed them to begin developing a specific, informed rhetoric to deploy in *I Witness* and other public spaces of speaking and writing. The work of the WRC demonstrates that inquiry and organizing need not be opposed—one can work with community organizations and in the context of local struggles toward identifiable goals while still engaging in thoughtful analysis. In fact, it seems that the necessity of the WRC taking a stance on the cameras and issues of policing motivated the process of inquiry within the group. Taking up the roles of both inquiry and organizing, community organizations avoid the formation of what Nancy Fraser calls a “weak public,” a public that consists “exclusively in opinion-formation and does not also encompass decision-making” (75). The role of the WRC as an advocate in the community created an exigency in which the organization needed to con-

duct a thoughtful inquiry, employ a critical literacy, and develop a persuasive rhetoric. Without the expectation of taking collective action, there would be no need for making these collective decisions.

Organic inquiry that leads to collective action also happens in Flower's description of a teenager named Shirley in *Community Literacy*. Shirley is a thirteen-year-old who joins a CLC conversation about risk and stress with other teens, CLC staff, and health care professionals. Her first time with the CLC, Shirley describes racial profiling and police harassment at a park that she often visits with friends. Through the CLC think-tank model, this turns into a question for rival hypothesis thinking, one of the key strategies of the CLC. During the exercise, the other participants try to understand the situation, offer different perspectives, and come to possible solutions (49). But while other teens and professionals at the table had witnessed and experienced similar incidents of discrimination, discussion was not framed toward collective action. The table instead engaged in discussion of hypothetical solutions, for which Flower provides transcripts (50–2). Through the discussion, the idea with the most traction is to have adults patrol the park with guns and cameras (50–1). While this idea receives strong critique, it is the only idea the group returns to and seems as serious as the other tongue-in-cheek responses in the transcript (the group is often laughing at ideas). There is little complaint and blame in the discussion, Flower's chief concern, but it is difficult to see how these hypothetical actions are an improvement.

At the end of the discussion, Shirley, who was the only teen at the table uninitiated in the CLC process, describes what she and her friends had actually done in response:

One day we decided to go up as a group and watch the cops discriminate—hassle the Blacks and not the whites. The second time they came up to the field frisking Blacks for no reason, we stood there and stared at them and kept staring at them until they noticed that we were witnesses to what was happening. When they noticed that we were looking at them, they looked like they were getting kinda scared, because they stopped frisking the kids and let them go. Me and my friends felt good because we felt that we had did something and that now they were scared of us—like we had some power. (52)

Concluding this section, Flower writes: “When Shirley finished, the pause was palpable. Her story had given a face and a feeling to racism and its effect on children. And our discussion had given a name and presence to rival hypotheses and alternative points of view—including the view of a mere ninth-grader, which

took the day” (52). While Flower uses Shirley’s story as an example of how the perspective of a teenager helps the process of inquiry, I read it as an example of the necessity of working collectively toward specific goals with others who have similar interests. According to the transcripts provided, Shirley used her knowledge of local micropolitics and police aggression to develop a feasible collective action with her friends, and she accomplished this without any outside rhetorical training. The expectation and necessity of collective action, it seems, is fundamental to making productive inquiry within contentious social situations and asymmetrical power.

None of this is to suggest that the CLC is not a useful model in many other contexts and social situations. But I write here in the hopes that the critiques of community organizations and community organizing used in moments to justify the CLC model are not universalized. Instead, working on inquiry within spaces like the CLC or with existing or developing community organizations can be seen as different organizational and rhetorical necessities for different social problems and power dynamics. In addition, no two organizations are the same, and organizing models are diverse. As the above examples demonstrate, through spaces of the hidden transcript in the context of local community organizing, community residents can develop the strategies and rhetorical tools for more public action, whether it be direct confrontation or, more likely, building collective power and deploying tactical rhetoric. Either way, awareness of how community residents organize for social change and participation within local campaigns can help community literacy workers at universities develop partnerships that are more effective in reaching community goals.

### **Reading Two Public Transcripts**

While Christopher Wilkey’s years spent with local activists fighting gentrification can serve as a productive example of community-university partnership in the context of community organizing, he also argues for the value of “speaking truth to power” in that work, making such critical public speech an implicit goal (47). Scott warns in the first line of *Domination*, “If the expression ‘Speak truth to power’ still has a utopian ring to it . . . this is surely because it is so rarely practiced” (1). Even while Scott and Cushman both describe the historical precedent and possibilities of the hidden transcript going public with more overt challenges to power (Scott 202–9; Cushman 239), their work cautions against outside collaborators who might try to push hidden transcripts into the public. Speaking truth to power requires either significant risk or a

certain degree of privilege. For this reason, it is important for scholars who are outsiders to participate by taking direction from neighborhood residents, not pushing them with academic prescriptions of civility nor with privileged notions of popular outrage.

Through community organizing and publishing, Westside residents built collective power and resources that amplified their perspectives. In contrast to the goal of speaking truth to power, residents adjusted this rhetoric for different publics. Scott's work with the hidden and public transcript provides a basic method for understanding the location of their public rhetoric on a

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continuum between critique and deference.

He writes, "By assessing the discrepancy between the hidden transcript and the public transcript we may begin to judge the impact of domination on public discourse" (*Domination* 5). An ideal application of this method would compare the hidden and public transcript, but I am reluctant to share the most hidden

transcripts I have access to. Instead, I apply Scott's method to two public sites of interaction between residents and police that are still markedly different. As Scott notes, showing an attention to rhetorical situations in his analysis, "for a relation of domination it ought to be possible to specify a continuum of social sites ranged according to how heavily or lightly they are patrolled by dominant elites" (120). This awareness applies to the release event for *I Witness* and the book itself, the two public forms I compare here.

The release event for *I Witness* was organized by the GSCP, the WRC, and the Westside Police Delegation—the main participants in the book project. A dozen officers and roughly forty residents attended. The night started with readings and a few theatrical performances based on *I Witness* by Mother Earth, Gary Bonaparte, Maarten Jacobs, Officer Todd Mooney, and a few neighborhood youth. Jacobs described an interaction he witnessed on a ride-along with police: residents spitting off their stoop as an officer walked by, and the officer "just hawks up a loogey and spits it right back on their property" (82). Mother Earth described how she walks around the Westside "ready to wave" at officers, but that "they not looking to wave" or give any warmth (19). At the same time, she describes how residents are also responsible because "these people that cause these crimes and do these things out in the world, they came from somewhere. . . out of some household" (20–21). Bonaparte described the

perception that cops are seen in the neighborhood as “white guys who send my uncle to prison” and read a story about his grandson who “loves cops” and how Bonaparte struggles with what to tell him (136–37). As demonstrated by the excerpts, the book represents complex perspectives and lived experiences of policing in the neighborhood, not without critique and blame but not outright denunciations of the police either.

After the readings, members of the WRC encouraged the police officers and residents to mix, eating sandwiches and talking about the themes raised through the readings. WRC members helped facilitate discussion at tables. Following the informal dialogue, Mother Earth and Deputy Chief Barrette co-facilitated a large-group discussion designed to create some paths forward for residents and police. John Burdick, an anthropology professor and participant in the formation of the WRC, took notes on large sheets of paper, sticking them to the walls so that everyone could review the growing list. I use these notes in contrast to the text and readings from *I Witness* in order to assess the effect of the police presence on public speech during this large group discussion. They are the most comprehensive piece of data available from the event, and the tenor of discussion they capture is echoed in my own notes and in reflections of WRC members about the night.

In contrast to the residents’ specific experiences and pointed critiques in the book, the large-group conversation revolved around loose terms like “dialogue,” “communication,” and “respect,” and residents took much of the responsibility for problems. Of twenty-six points recorded from the discussion, the most critical is “Police perceptions of Westside a problem?”—a critique cushioned by a question mark. A plurality of comments (twelve of twenty-six) describes the need for more community-police collaboration, including:

- Need more dialogue between residents and police
- Maybe another [community-police] event like breakfast<sup>5</sup>
- Possible to bring neighborhood watch back
- Some ride-along [with police] still possible
- Need to have more activities that put officers in contact with youth

These initiatives are all potentially beneficial to long-term community policing and safety in the neighborhood, and some of them have been taken up in the years following this meeting (there have been two basketball tournaments, for instance, that included both youth and police). But instead of indicating



a willingness for the police to change their actions, most of these examples require additional work from residents: building spaces for dialogue at events with police, bringing police and the community together, and starting a neighborhood watch. Absent from the list are specific calls for the police to take responsibility for changing their actions in the community.

In *I Witness*, residents call for dialogue and communication, but they also name abuses directly, call out officers as bullies, and question officers' training and professionalism. The following examples are some of the more critical lines in the book, not representative of the book as a whole, but the sort of thing that was not aired publicly during the large group discussion that closed the event:

- "That badge means your job is to uphold the law, not to sit there and treat people like a lower-class citizen" (Curran 94).
- "Especially with young Black men and Latinos the police are very close-minded" (Hunter 43).
- "Instead of just saying, 'Don't get out of the car,' [the officer] just slammed the door on his leg" (Rothwell 35).
- "They never actually look at their own behavior and say 'What have we done? Why do so many fucking people hate us?' And the cops never ask that question because they're right, and anyone who hates them is a criminal" (Bonaparte 127).

Instead of residents naming accounts of disrespect, brutality, and racism in the neighborhood, it was the officers' experiences that were publicly aired. Some of these points were informative; others struck me as both patronizing and simplistic. For instance, one point offered by the police was translated on the page as: "Reality: Police have little room to interpret law." Even though the room enacted a ritual of nodding when the police spoke this point, the experiences of residents in the book make it clear that officers do not simply drive through neighborhoods objectively applying a single set of laws. Still, this was the only point prefaced with the word "reality," reinforcing the idea that the police have the power to claim the truth of their experiences, at least in a public forum such as this. We could compare it to "Police perceptions of Westside a problem?," a lived reality expressed in one way or another by every resident in *I Witness* that was hesitantly spoken and put on the list with a question mark—as if the point, coming from residents, was open for debate. In a conversation

with Bonaparte a year after the event, he mentioned how growing up in the Westside, “You learn to leave the cops alone, to be nice to cops.” This speaks again to the calculated deference learned through a life under conditions of asymmetrical power (and in particular interacting with police who are literal, physical arbiters of power). But this community meeting, a major event with police after a year of organizing, seemed like a moment to push the possibilities of the public transcript. I wondered if the event and the book might combine to be what Scott describes as one of the “rare moments of political electricity when, often for the first time in memory, the hidden transcript is spoken directly and publicly in the teeth of power” (*Domination* xiii). As the meeting notes demonstrate, this was not the case, but success and failure should not be judged on the amount of deferential or confrontational speech. Nancy Fraser argues that an effective subaltern counterpublic pushes public debate in such a way that “assumptions that were previously exempt from contestation will now have to be publicly argued out” (67).

With this idea in mind, one way of viewing the police officer’s comments about the “reality” of their application of law in the neighborhood could be seen as a response to the criticisms read earlier in the night—to Bonaparte’s description of police as “white guys who send my uncle to prison,” for instance. Common assumptions about the role of police were contested in the space, even if challenged in a somewhat diplomatic way. Meetings such as this are counterproductive when they become the bourgeois public sphere that Fraser critiques—a public sphere that superficially involves historically marginalized people, bracketing differences in power and becoming “the prime institutional site for the construction of the consent that defines the new, hegemonic mode of domination” (62). Were the nodding heads of community residents and community partners consent to the dominant view of police as objective arbiters of law? Or was it a sympathetic gesture, meant to soften the blow of the criticisms read earlier? In a reflection that night, I wrote: “I think [the police] left unsettled without being upset.” In my opinion, the event represented neither speaking truth to power nor the dramatization of hierarchy. The rhetorical forms happened in part by design with the facilitators and list of speakers chosen by the WRC and the GSCP and partly as residents and officers made tactical choices for speaking. Happening in the Westside, surrounded by residents and community partners, it was a moment that pushed the boundaries of public speech on policing in the neighborhood without taking too many risks.

### **“Not Just to Tell Horror Stories”**

While *I Witness* is more critical of police than the face-to-face interaction at the book’s release event, the rhetoric of community residents in *I Witness* also demonstrates an attention to and awareness of audience and tactical

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rhetoric. For instance, Bonaparte’s story, while being the most critical of police, is also aware of the way its tone and content could affect an audience. Bonaparte told his story to me and my tape recorder one night in his kitchen, and I transcribed and

returned it to him later that week. Upon reading his transcript, Bonaparte made a few key changes, including the addition of an introductory paragraph to frame his chapter:

My reason for saying these things is not to indict the police, but to give my perception. It’s not because I think my viewpoint is necessarily correct, but because it’s common and should be known to people who are not from the Westside. If you recognize people as human and know what they’re thinking, and have respect for them, you can try to overcome the problems these perceptions might make. So this is not just to tell horror stories, but to show how people feel and how they came to feel that way. (113)

About a year after the book’s release, I asked Bonaparte what went into his decision to add this introductory paragraph. He told me that he had thought of police officers and people outside the neighborhood reading his chapter and thinking that he “just hates the cops.” But, by framing the chapter in this way, he argues that the reader needs to understand how he and others “came to feel that way” if they want to make progress on issues of policing (113). This is a statement that sets up the rest of his chapter, reframing honest critique as necessary for improved policing, not just an excuse to tell horror stories. Here, just as in Bonaparte’s line about how “people around [the neighborhood]” think of authorities “as white guys who send my uncle to prison,” Bonaparte is relaying a shared understanding and description, which mitigates the personal risk of these statements. In a sense, he is making the hidden transcript public by explicitly naming that hidden transcript as collective and not individual.

The book’s cover also occupies a rhetorical space between closed-fisted and open-handed rhetoric. The resident members of the editorial board chose the image shown in Figure 1, and one resident board member helped to frame

the shot. The image shows two young girls from the community (granddaughters of a resident editor), bright colored braids in their hair, each raising a hand up towards a police surveillance camera. The girl on the right points, her index finger reaching toward the camera as if to exclaim, “I see you”; the girl on the left raises a peace sign for the camera. It is both an acknowledgment of the camera’s presence in the neighborhood—that the residents see them, that they notice the invasive police presence—and a representation of the ultimate goal for residents: to live in peace and safety, especially for the community’s young people. To the right of the girls and camera is a street sign announcing two-way traffic. One arrow points down toward the young girls, the other up in the direction of the camera. In a way, the image suggests the rhetorical power of the book: the cameras may represent the constant surveillance of the police, but the book announces that the residents, too, are watching. The police’s videotape and their “reality” will no longer be the only stories told and heard from this neighborhood. With the community publication, the neighborhood has the power to record and represent back.

It is not a cover image that suggests a radical change in the neighborhood, an overthrow of the police, or an outright and total denunciation of their practices. But it is far from the dramatization of hierarchy that police and city officials might expect. Scott writes about how the maintenance of control requires that formal power holders keep a tight grip of the public transcript, saying that “defining and constituting what counts as the public transcript [is] no small measure of their power” (*Domination* 14). In community publishing, working for social change can mean helping to move the boundaries of public representation, working with resident-led organizations to build power and



Figure 1. Cover of *I Witness: Perspectives on Policing in the Near Westside*.

open up space for the voices and perspectives less often heard. This is one measure of transformational success, but it is only effective if these moments are part of a collective process that can win long-term change.

### **From “Tough Guy” to “Mr. Bonaparte”**

There are no easy equations for how social change, or relatively any change for that matter, happens. In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy asks if an apple is “brought down by the force of gravity” or “because its stalk withers” or “because the boy standing under the tree wants to eat it” (719). In this brief case study, it is stories that will have to make the link from cause and effect, the small stories of change in the neighborhood as the Westside Police Delegation began and *I Witness* was published. One story that I have heard is of a three-year-old boy, on a summer night, out alone past dark. The police picked him up and began calling each house on the block, hoping to find his parents. This would not be news in most neighborhoods, but the residents I spoke to could not recall another occasion in which police had gone out of their way to serve the community like this, and they chalked up the change to the increased attention on police.

Another story comes from Bonaparte, whose chapter in *I Witness* gives some sharp critiques of police. From decades of experiences with police in the neighborhood, he describes how they covered up their shooting of a young African American man, intimidated Bonaparte as a potential witness, drank on the job, committed acts of brutality, and performed other acts of everyday abuse and disrespect. These stories are told with a precision of detail and are backed up in other residents’ narratives, both inside and outside the book, adding to their power and credibility. Bonaparte also tells a story of his own recent confrontations with police in the book: “One day about a year ago, there was a cop that was out here—he was pushing me around, he was bumping me, and he was saying, ‘Come on, tough guy! Come on!’ And he said, ‘I’ll kick the shit outta ya!’” This is just another example of what daily life can be like for residents in the Westside and what is at stake in the local campaign for accountable community policing. Talking to Bonaparte a year after the release of *I Witness*, he told me of a recent interaction with a police officer. His daughter called him on the phone after being pulled over near the house with a friend. Bonaparte came outside to speak with the officer. As he approached, the officer said, “Hello, Mr. Bonaparte,” hailing Bonaparte in a way that surprised him.

This is not a grand shift in power, but one that matters. Bonaparte’s daughter still received a ticket, but, thinking about the situation that unfolded,

Bonaparte said, “I don’t know what [the officer] would have done otherwise, but he had to take into consideration that I’m somebody who would speak up.” Bonaparte confirmed that he met the officer through the release event for *I Witness*, where Bonaparte read from his contribution to the book. A story about the book also ran on the front page of Syracuse’s only daily newspaper, *The Post Standard*, and excerpts from the book were published three days in a row, adding to the visibility of policing issues in the neighborhood (Dowty). Reflecting more on his interaction with the officer, Bonaparte described his view that “people who are thought not to have power” in society are mistreated because people in power “don’t have to suffer consequences when [they] mess with powerless people.” I asked if the book publication and community organizing had made him into someone who the police now see as a powerful person.

Bonaparte responded that he is probably seen “not as a powerful person, but not as a powerless person either.” This interaction is not evidence of the political

**This story is about the process of resident-led community organizing and community-university partnership that cleared a space in which to test the limits of public speech and published writing on the way toward neighborhood goals.**

electricity that overthrows established power, but it was significant to Bonaparte and indicative of a slowly shifting dynamic between neighborhood residents and police. The change from “tough guy” to “Mr. Bonaparte,” while minor, suggests a change from someone whom the police can harass and intimidate without recourse to someone who is treated with some respect and standing in the community. If there is anything to learn from Scott’s scholarship, it is that the dramatization of hierarchy in public is central to the maintenance of power relations. For all we know, the police officer may curse Bonaparte in private, but in public this particular officer showed deference, something Bonaparte received from a police officer for the first time he could recall in his fifty years in the neighborhood.

But to be clear, this story is not just about Bonaparte. This is not a story about an autonomous actor with the courage to speak out or the ability to turn inquiry into savvy individual acts. This story is about the process of resident-led community organizing and community-university partnership that cleared a space in which to test the limits of public speech and published writing on the way toward neighborhood goals. It is part of a collective process toward effective rhetorical acts within a long-term strategy for local rights, resources, and respect. This process is worth further study and action in our field and

worth discussion in our classrooms. As Nancy Welch argues, “in arguments for social change is the future of the very idea of a public good” (“Informed” 46). The result we can hope for is an expanded public discourse tied to community organizations and led by community residents.

## Notes

1. I want to thank the editors for allowing me to add this foreword, and I need to thank the reviewers, friends, and colleagues who offered feedback on this article.
2. Today, as the CCCC has grown in size, this type of move may be more effective. While there was some discussion, unfortunately the conference was not moved from Florida in 2015 in response to Trayvon Martin’s killing and Florida’s Stand Your Ground law. Since racist police and vigilante violence happen within systems and institutions of power, institutions taking bold stances can form part of a national response.
3. Steve Parks provides more background on the formation of the WRC and the GSCP in “Sinners Welcome.”
4. Raul Pinet Jr.’s killing has been a flashpoint for organizing against jail brutality in Syracuse, but the details of his death came out slowly and were recognized as Onondaga County issues as much as Westside issues. His killing represents some of the historic and ongoing tension between neighborhood residents and the police and legal system, but police cameras were the issue that galvanized much of the Westside to action during the period of the book’s formation.
5. The Westside Police Delegation had organized a brunch and invited Westside police officers several months earlier, an attempt to have police and residents interact outside of the context of 911 calls and arrests.

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