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## IMAGINING EMPOWERMENT: Telling Stories in Writing Programs

Message: 3244767

Posted: 7:45 p.m. EDT, Wed., June 28/89

Subject: Day 3, Wednesday, June 28, 1989. Children's Day!!

A good day, spent mostly at the Cultural Center area in Detroit, near Wayne State University, to which we all walked. I videotaped one of our groups' walking tours out of the rough projects area through the gradually rejuvenating neighborhoods to the very highly developed Cultural Center area. When we got there, it was wild, with thousands of excited kids and a few harried adults escorting them, and many special events. We went in different groups to different places, some to the African American Museum, some to the Science Museum, some to the Detroit Institute of Arts, depending on kids' stated interests. It was a pretty organized day, though, thanks to Debi. The thing we all observed was the traditional African dancers and musicians outside the African American Museum. Very colorful and interesting. There was a children's parade, too. We were stopped by many people who asked us what our T-shirts meant, and asked us where we were from. I was stopped on the street, for instance, by a woman who wanted to know about the project and who offered publication to any student who would write about something to do with plant life, vegetation, or gardening in the area for her Urban Planning State Newsletter! People were really friendly to us all day.

Kids returned to write like mad about what they had experienced about this day, and the outer fringes of "their neighborhood." We have 28 kids as of today, and 2 still coming. We are a

little disappointed about having kids come in late, who miss the initial stages of the building of our community, but again, we have to be flexible. I do, anyway. Others already know how, I think, from experience! At any rate, we know all the kids' names now, and are getting to know them. We are all developing "favorite kid" relationships, of course, and there are certain kids each one of us is particularly "watching."

We have our internal struggles as a staff, of course, which is I think interesting in different ways to all of us. We have different concerns about efficiency, noise, organization, freedom/autonomy; voices have been raised the last couple days in teacher meetings in the afternoons. Some people think the greater experience George and I have merits making most of the decisions for the rest of us, and we deny that right. We are fascinated with what it means to collaborate with each other, which is good (the fascination) because at times it isn't easy. We are teacher-researching this project together, for sure. We all thought it was a good, productive day, but there was some disagreement about just how productive it was. Some tension evident.

Another break-in last night, but our stuff was secure, locked up. We are learning! We are trying to be as careful as possible. It's terrible to have this feeling of "onslaught"; over time I can imagine it gets very tiring and enraging, but it's inevitable, I suppose. It is hard for me to remember that this threat of violence and theft is a way of life for almost all of these kids, and the rule is to be smart and careful and lock things up. I can see why people would just rather not teach in such situations, but for us right now, and for many of us more than just right now, the exciting benefits far outweigh the negative aspects.

I turned off the machine, walked into the kitchen and grabbed a beer. I was tired after another day in Detroit. Hot and tired. I took a long pull on the Labatts, stretched my back and neck and pressed them against the refrigerator, closed my eyes, and waited for the beer to ease into my arms. I kept my eyes closed and waited for the voices to be still.

Relax. Think about something else. Sit in a chair. Read a book. Drink the beer.

I wandered into the living room, spotted Bakhtin on the table where I'd left him the night before. I took another swallow and eased into the familiar comfort of my dark leather chair. I flipped through the text and stopped at a page. I read what he says about language:

I imagine this whole to be something like an immense novel, multi-generic, multi-styled, mercilessly critical, soberly mocking, reflecting in all its fullness the heteroglossia and multiple voices of a given culture, people and epoch (60).

No good. Too much work for right now.

I walked outside and breathed in sweet honeysuckle. I watched the evening creep into the day. Strolling into the garden, a riot of colors and smells swept through me: poppies, roses, peonies, lilies of the valley, bleeding hearts. I sat in a wooden chair in the yard for a few minutes and finished my beer. I was momentarily stilled.

I took a walk down my dead-end street, past the comfortable brick houses and the quiet summer lawns. No one sitting on the porches. I was alone with my thoughts. I returned to my house and sat down to write in my journal. A place to tell myself what I thought. In a way like talking to George Cooper about it. Where I can be more honest, candid. The electronic version had been directed to people in the university, many of whom knew even less than I did about Detroit, most of whom didn't know the individuals and might misconstrue my comments as criticism. I didn't want to tell my story in public in ways I might later regret. I wrote:

Today was a strange day, in many ways exciting, in many ways troubling. I loved parts of the morning. For instance, I filmed Susan and my group's walk from the Dewey Center to the Cultural Center, hoping it would capture the absolute contrasts of the two areas. I liked the African dances and enjoyed filming this, and the kids' reactions, but it was too damned hot, and most things were so badly planned, and so late, that the effect was really sloppy. So much wasted time! We couldn't have known it, but we sat out in the sun for nearly forty-five minutes waiting for the dancers to begin, after waiting for the mask-making demonstration which we finally learned was canceled! I liked the art in the African American Museum. The kids really did very well. On the way back it was so hot that Susan and I let some of the kids go in a water fountain. I wanted to go in myself, but didn't, finally. Kids were tired after the walk and the heat, and though some kids did seem to write a lot, the more I think about it, most of them didn't really write much when we got back. But who could blame them? It just wasn't a great experience. I hope we don't have too many days like this one.

The afternoon was really emotional. Susan and Jeanetta brought up their concern in the teacher meeting, and both of

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them seemed really upset. Jeanetta and George had been with their group, which included Dora, Tameka, Farrah, Aquileth, and LaShunda. Jeanetta said we all had different standards than she did in the classroom. She reminded us she had a reputation for being a tough teacher, but said she had been trying to “hang back” here in the summer in order to learn. She said she tried to watch and learn, but she had some problems with the way some of us failed to discipline students for certain things; it was sometimes far beyond her tolerance level. Susan reinforced this. She was upset about this, too.

I know Susan thinks things like the planning are too loose but was surprised to see Jeanetta upset. I asked what Jeanetta was specifically upset about, what had triggered this. She said she wasn't upset, really, but “had questions” about some things. She and Susan were sitting close to each other. Dana was sitting between me and Toby on the other side of the room and not talking. Jeanetta got help from Susan, but basically explained how hard it was to see kids not being confronted for “playing around” and not accomplishing much, and “was this normal in this kind of approach to teaching?” More specifically, she said, for example, that she was personally “bothered,” and it went beyond her personal “tolerance level” when she saw kids “eating on the street.” As a teacher, she would never allow that. George said he hadn't realized it was such a big deal. “I probably eat on the street all the time,” he said. I said I did, too. “But you can do that. You are white teachers, and these are black students,” Jeanetta explained. Here they were in their white T-shirts, representing the Dewey Center, and they have this food (she mimicked exaggeratedly and comically) dribbling down their chin. “No,” she said. “No! Maybe it's just me, but that really bothers me.” We all laughed. “No,” I said, “You should bring it up, that's what these sessions are for,” etc.

Susan I think is really angry about this. She said that black children, and especially poor black children, need to be “guided” to avoid what she called “stereotypical behavior,” and she said this was one example of the kind of behavior that stigmatized poor blacks. But who sets these standards? It is repellent to me to have to make these kids follow these standards, if they are essentially racist standards.

“Black students with that food all over, walking on the street, no!” Jeanetta said. We laughed. “I don't let my kids do it, why should I let these students do it?”

Susan said it was important for white teachers to know and be sensitive about “black views for how to raise and educate their children.” She told a story about when she had been an administrator of a school in Alabama and there was one white teacher in their school that she and her colleagues really had come to admire because he “upheld the standards all of the black adults had for the black children.” She said it was different for black kids than white kids or adults, because blacks have to work against so much prejudice, they have to work twice as hard to succeed, and part of this involved adhering to acceptable forms of behavior for society. She said she and most of her fellow blacks really respected white teachers who did this. (Moral of parable: We clearly were not there yet for her!)

Susan rarely talks in our teacher meetings and usually reserves sharing her concerns for the car ride back to Ann Arbor with George, Dana, and me. She said, “You have to understand! I really love being involved in this project, and I think what you all are doing is wonderful, creating positive learning experiences for these children, but what I’m saying is coming from my perspective as a black educator. I really care about these children! When I think about these children, living in these projects, this gives me pain! This hurts me! Being black, it may be different for Jeanetta and me and Dana, the way we see it. But these are *our* children, and we don’t want things to go on this way!”

This pissed off Toby and Debi, and I thought it was troubling, too, in some ways. Toby said she and Debi had devoted all their lives to working with kids of all colors in the inner city, and she felt the kids were “*my* kids, too.” Susan was quick to say that we had convinced her, generally, just by the fact that we were there, working with kids and obviously caring to help them. Both she and Jeanetta said they wouldn’t even be part of the program if they didn’t believe that and trust us, and they loved the opportunity, and were learning a lot, etc., “But you asked us to share our concerns, and this is something we just don’t agree with,” Susan said.

Both Toby and Debi wondered why it was blacks that got singled out. Toby said she tried to treat all her kids in a way that was “color blind.” She didn’t like the idea of blacks being treated differently than whites, especially if it meant more restrictions on their behavior. I agreed.

Susan said that blacks are already singled out for negative treatment and are treated differently, so they have to be given

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special consideration by teachers to overcome obstacles. They just need to be able to fit into mainstream society, to get the same skills that everyone else needs to succeed. She insisted again that blacks need the same education, the same skills that whites get, or they won't succeed. I agreed with this, and am sympathetic to her desire not to create a separate but equal black English vernacular "language apartheid," but after reading the work of Smitherman and Labov, can't fully agree with her. I am mad at some of her assumptions, since her position seems to imply that only blacks can really teach blacks, or that only blacks should decide what blacks need, or that blacks have to "imitate" white standards to survive. Maybe she means none of these things, exactly.

But I like both Jeanetta and Susan very much. We are all getting very close in many respects, and it was an exciting (though tense at times) discussion, which lasted almost three hours altogether. As Debi said, "I have never had a discussion like this with other teachers all the years I have taught. Dave, we have to start taping these talks." This really is a great learning experience!

The learning experience to which Debi Goodman refers is one in which the seven teachers and thirty students who participated in the Dewey Center Community Writing Project in Detroit in the summer of 1989 were engaged. It's an experience with a history and one that makes a history. Its history relies on the personal histories of those of us who participated in it—both the versions of those histories that are written in our memories and the versions of those histories that are inscribed in our cultures. Furthermore, its history is being told in various stories, multiple stories; and in this story, my story—made of all the other stories—it is being written.

I thought about the stories the students were already writing, the stories that they were shaping and the stories they were being shaped by—those they were hearing from each other and from their neighbors in the program.

MISS ROSE BELL  
*Julia Pointer*

### Chapter 1

Stepping out of that taxi cab, I finally realized. This was real. This baby inside me is real. The fact that my mama threw me out is real.

"What's wrong with you chile," she screamed when I told her. "Don't you see these five other kids running around me?!"

I glanced about. Mark, Janie and Tony were an inch away from the TV watching a violent show. Millie was in the kitchen eating cookies, again. She never got enough to eat. And little Jimmy, the baby, was tugging at my mother's earrings that hung from her ears. Then, I looked back at my mother just in time to hear her say, "You go find your boyfriend. He got you this far, tell him to take care of you, feed you, and love you. Cause it seems to me you don't appreciate nothing I done for you!" I stood up in alarm.

"Mama you can't do this to me," I pleaded. "I'm only sixteen." (*Corridors* 39)

#### MY LIFE

##### *Laquida Talbert*

I was born in the Phillipines in 1977 because my father was stationed there. When my mother was pregnant with me my dad sent for her and my sister. When I was born I had a disease called sickle cell.

I keep myself from getting depressed about it by not letting it take over my pride. I try to be happy, and not think about how long I have to live with this disease. (*Corridors* 51–52)

#### I AM A NEVER ENDING ROAD

I am a never ending road  
winding into the darkness  
a howling breeze  
looming trees  
whistling willows  
light sprinkles of rain seeping through

I am a vine hanging from the trees  
wrapping and twisting through the jungle.

I am James Cook. (*Corridors* 2)

How important it is, I thought, that these students get the opportunity to share their stories with each other, with those of us who were their teachers, and with their fellow community members, and how important it can be for teachers to have the opportunity to talk together about how to better help students learn to write. I thought about the many students and teachers in other places with whom I

had worked in similar writing programs. How different was this world of Detroit's Cass Corridor, this world in which I was still an outsider, eager and impatient to learn.

A BRIEF HISTORY: THE HURON SHORES SUMMER WRITING  
INSTITUTE, SAGINAW PROJECT 98, AND COMMUNITY WRITING

During the 1985–86 academic year, Cathy Fleischer, John Lofty, and I were graduate student teaching assistants at the University of Michigan, where we engaged in a collaborative teaching project in Rogers City. Working with Rogers City High School teachers Dan Madigan and Jim Hopp and several Rogers City area students and community members, we developed the Huron Shores Summer Writing Institute. Cathy, John, and I were excited that year about the possibility of putting into action principles of language learning like those Angela Jaggar and Trika Smith-Burke had named:

1. Language learning is a self-generated, creative process.
2. Language learning is holistic. The different components of language—form, function and meaning—are learned simultaneously.
3. Language learning is social and collaborative.
4. Language learning is functional and integrative.
5. Language learning is variable. Because language is inherently variable, the meanings, the forms, and the functions of children's language will depend on their personal, social and cultural experiences. (7)

After months of planning involving teachers, students, and members of the local community, the first year's program took place in Rogers City during three weeks in the summer of 1986. With guidance from five teachers, thirty area high school students drew upon the resources of their experience and their community to investigate their worlds. Students researched in settings as diverse as the Presque Isle County Historical Museum, local libraries, and the Presque Isle Lighthouse; they read primary texts produced in and about their community, observed their surroundings, interviewed their neighbors, and inscribed what they learned from all their research activities. The students' general interest in—and the teachers' consequent emphasis on—interviewing and oral history were apparent in that first year when the students audiotaped interviews with more than seventy community members. Before the summer was over, students desktop published a collection of their writing, *Break-*



*wall*, explaining the title and their project in its preface: "A breakwall prevents the erosion of the earth. We hope that our *Breakwall* will help to prevent the erosion of our Northern Michigan heritage." In the four summers since its beginning, the Huron Shores Summer Writing Program has expanded, and three more volumes of *Breakwall* have been published. Other area and University of Michigan teachers have become involved in the program, among them George Cooper, lecturer in the English Composition Board of the University of Michigan.

A graduate student in the English and Education doctoral program at the University of Michigan at the time, I had taught at Grand Valley State University for three years, but I had also been a high school teacher for seven years, and I wanted to continue working with high school teachers and students. When I had first returned to school I had worked with the University of Michigan's Center for Educational Improvement through Collaboration (CEIC)<sup>1</sup> in urban Saginaw, Michigan, in a university-school project developed by these teachers from the University of Michigan and teachers from Saginaw's high schools. The project was designed to support the development of innovative approaches to literacy instruction.

In Saginaw, two high schools sit on either side of the Saginaw River: Saginaw High with a 98 percent African American student body, Arthur Hill with 30 percent. In 1987, in one of many projects that formed the larger CEIC-Saginaw Public Schools Collaboration, two high school teachers, one at Arthur Hill, one at Saginaw High, team-taught classes with Patricia Stock. Led by their teachers and other literacy workers from the CEIC, including me, students in these classes produced *The Bridge*, a book of stories about growing up in Saginaw. The texts the students wrote constituted one visible representation of "the bridge" they had begun to form between their two schools, between the cultures in their city. These texts were, as well, an exploration of students' own worlds, shaped in terms of their own interests. While working on this project, I continued to develop my interest in student and teacher collaboration and in community-based approaches to literacy education; moreover, working in Saginaw, I learned more about how teachers might teach and learn better in multicultural settings.

While I was working in Saginaw, my colleague, George Cooper, was also developing an interest in multicultural education through his work in intensive writing tutorials at the University of Michigan. Students, required to take these tutorials as a result of their performance on a university writing assessment, struggle with the de-

mands of adapting to academic discourse and writing generally. Many of these students are minority students, and many from nearby Detroit.

My work in Saginaw and George's with students from Detroit led us to wonder if we could develop a community-based summer writing project in Detroit. Would a similar community-based program, a program emphasizing the collaborative learning and teaching of instructors and students, work in another community? Because of our interest in urban education, and because we had seen some remarkable investment in writing and learning in Rogers City on the part of both teachers and students, we worked to bring a similar community writing project to inner-city Detroit. In Rogers City, we had seen closer ties develop between the community and the school, and we had seen many students become excited about writing and carry that excitement back into school settings.

#### DETROIT: PLANNING A COMMUNITY-BASED WRITING PROJECT

*"To study literacy and its uses is to commit oneself to the study of contexts and relations."* (J. Robinson, 347)

In several meetings in Ann Arbor beginning in October 1988, several of us from the university, including Jay Robinson, Patti Stock, George Cooper, and I, and two Detroit Public School teachers, Toby Curry, a seventh-grade teacher, and Debra Goodman, a fifth-grade teacher, began to explore the possibilities of developing a community-based summer writing project at the Couzens School in Detroit.

The James P. Couzens School had been scheduled for closing until Toby and Debi proposed developing it into an alternative, "Whole Language" pre-kindergarten through eighth-grade school, which the Detroit Public School Board accepted. In fall 1989, Couzens was renamed the Dewey Center for Urban Education. Located near the Jeffries Homes, a low-cost housing project in the troubled Cass Corridor of Detroit's inner city, the Dewey Center is one of the community schools that serves the "projects." Although it is now an alternative school, a school which students from all over Detroit may attend, fewer than 35 percent of its students come from somewhere other than the immediate area.

Our purpose in developing a community-based summer writing program at the Dewey Center was the same one that led us to de-

velop such a program in Rogers City: to see if, during the summer, we could generate excitement about writing among students and teachers that might move into fall school classrooms. As in Rogers City, we wanted to work with students in Detroit in such a way that they would be able to claim ownership of their writing and have more control over the conditions in which that writing was accomplished. In addition, we wanted to work with teachers researching issues surrounding the teaching of literacy in a multicultural environment—research in literacy consistent with Lather's notion of "research as praxis," or research for reflective change (257).

Together with Detroit students, teachers, and community members, we wanted to develop a language-based approach to learning with one goal of the project also being the publication of a book of students' writing about their community. By developing an alternative to the usually distant relationship between the university and the schools, we knew we might be able to explore possibilities, imagine different ways of teaching and learning, by working with each other. Students, who typically learn in ways that isolate them from their peers and who rarely get the chance to decide what they will learn in an academic setting, were excited about planning a program, about the possibility of seeing themselves as writers, and being published in a book they would shape themselves.

Teachers, who are even more typically isolated than students, were excited to have conversations about teaching writing, about using writing to learn, exploring ways of developing activities for learning consistent with students' ways of knowing that were closely connected with students' lives. Community members and University of Michigan administrators were excited about what they saw as a new commitment to the area, some activity that might link various Detroit and university agencies in thoughtful action.

In the winter 1989 term, Toby and Debi presented a whole-language seminar at the Dewey Center for various area teachers, hoping to use the sessions to introduce the principles of whole language teaching and to promote conversations about better ways to teach inner-city children. Nervous, excited, we got in early for the first session and I took notes on the area as I first experienced it.

### *A Walk through the Neighborhood*

The Dewey Center is located in Detroit's Cass Corridor, on the corner of John C. Lodge and Martin Luther King Boulevard. Standing on the south steps of the school building, glancing to the south, directly across Martin Luther King, I see a row of faded red, two-story apart-

ment complexes called the Jeffries Homes, which most people call "the projects," and behind them, less than two miles away, the towering downtown buildings gleaming high into the sky. These new and newly renovated buildings stand as testimony to Mayor Coleman Young's administration's economic priorities for "urban renewal" in the eighties. Many of the upper stories are clearly visible from the south steps of the school; they grace the skyline, beckoning out-of-state business investors to new financial commitments and possible capital gains.

"Welcome to Jeffries Homes," a large, old sign greets us, across the street from the Dewey Center on the corner of John C. Lodge and Martin Luther King Boulevard, its white paint chipping away. Block after block to the south, rows of red brick, two-story Jeffries Homes extend in the direction of the downtown development. Many more apartment complexes stand, similarly faded, marred with peeling paint and graffiti, with windows boarded over here and there. Consisting of twelve rows of old red brick buildings, the area is circumscribed by Martin Luther King Boulevard to the north, Temple to the south, Fourth Avenue to the east, and John C. Lodge to the west. Women and girls with their babies stroll by; some sit on the concrete steps of the apartments. Two men work on a Buick in the street. The sixty-nine buildings that comprise the projects were built mostly in the fifties; they are home for most of the students who live in the Dewey Center area.

To the east, across the sunken Lodge freeway, there is another section of the Jeffries Homes, more projects, which many people refer to as the "high rises" (to distinguish them from the "low rises" to the south of the Dewey Center), several bleak, mostly ten-story buildings that also stand in stark contrast to the tall buildings downtown. A central location in the late sixties riots, the projects are home twenty years later to retirees unable to do better on dwindling pensions, welfare mothers—many of them teenaged, most with several children—a few struggling longtime residents who have demonstrated their commitment to the area, and some of whom we would meet later—George McMahon, Molly Rubino, and Rose Bell among them. Still bearing the scars from the riots of twenty-three years ago—broken windows, burned wood—the high rises are dark, massive, cold. Encompassing a far greater area than the low rises, from Martin Luther King to the south to Gibson to the north, and from John C. Lodge in the east to Canfield in the west, is more space for grass, but the faded green lawns bear inexplicably large, forbidding signs: "No Ball Playing. Order of Detroit Housing Commission, City of

Detroit.” And the rule seems to be obeyed; no children play ball on this grass. Neighborhood advocate Rose Bell would, the next summer, tell us she plants “flowers for peace” on her lawn and encourages her neighbors to do so, too. “Someday,” Ms. Bell said to us, looking out the kitchen window past the burned-out apartment to the vacant sidewalks, “kids are going to be playing hopscotch out there. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing. I’d move out of here right quick.”

Other people move from here when they get the chance: statistics indicate clearly that this is an increasingly violent area, and even the most optimistic person, like Rose Bell, recognizes that crack is killing people here. As even Ms. Bell agonizingly admits, even some homeless people prefer the streets to these buildings of despair.

Less than two miles north of the Dewey Center is another area of recent development, the Cultural Center area near Wayne State University, which includes the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Detroit Museum of Science, the Walter Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, and the African American Museum. Within walking distance of the Dewey Center, the impressive architectural design and powerful, contemporary structures stand testimony to other kinds of commitments: to the arts, to a sense of history, and to an attempt at articulating cultural values that are perhaps—or are presumed to be—shared. Expensive, supported by extensive endowments, they are monuments befitting a great city’s accomplishments and are rooted in the past.

Within three or four blocks east of the Dewey Center, in isolated one-block neighborhoods on Cass and Second Avenue, young homeowners purchase affordable old buildings, some of them long abandoned, and restore them to their original condition. Young businesspersons, also attracted to the affordable real estate, have slowly begun to take chances on establishing restaurants in this area, four blocks away from the school. Also to the east on Cass is the Burton International School, a highly successful magnet school where Toby and Debi taught for several years. One business remains from the mid-seventies Cass Corridor Community Business Association: the Cass Corridor Community Food Co-op, one block east and three blocks north of the Dewey Center. Churches, many of them Baptist, are still active in the community. The rubble of demolished apartment buildings and housing projects remains in vacant lots everywhere. Little Cass Park, the only public park in the area, is filled, day and night, primarily with homeless men and occasional crack dealers. Billy Jo Roark writes of this park, in *Corridors*:

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### CASS PARK

My dad told me not to go in that park, and I said “why?” He told me that there are drunks and winos there and that they deal drugs there, too. People who need money sell stuff they’ve stolen like fans, pin wheels, basketballs and give them to their friends. They even give them to their relatives. These big teenagers also bust bottles when they throw them at people without homes who live in the park. (27)

A brief walk down Third Avenue, from Forest to Martin Luther King, might be useful for understanding the complexity of the world of the Corridor, especially the immediate area of the Dewey Center, and the great challenges the area now faces and has always faced. Seeing it, I was reminded of James Spradley’s depiction of the world of the homeless some twenty years earlier: “The streets of America are convulsed in pain. It is in the streets and alleys, fills the air, crowds into our living rooms. . . . Can we create a society which recognizes the dignity of diverse cultural patterns?” (1). But it is more than just pain, as Spradley would be quick to point out. In the long single block from Forest to Selden, there are several vacant storefronts, but there are also many active churches: the Greater King Solomon Baptist Church, Hale’s Tabernacle United Primitive Baptist Church, the Evangelistic Tabernacle of Faith, the Glorious Tabernacle, with the Evangelistic Ministry of Pastor Mary Lou Brown. The City of Detroit Social Services Building appears long deserted, but I am told that the churches remain active sources of hope for area residents.

On the corner of Selden and Third, some businesses seem to be surviving, but on the southeast corner a three-story brick building stands burned out and gutted, all of its windows broken. “Used to be a crack house,” a man on the corner told me, “but not no more. Burned out a few times, those people, they all gone, most of them in jail or shot dead.” Many people I would later meet know stories about various inhabitants of this once elegant building, now destroyed.

Crossing Selden, walking north toward King, I see a large vacant lot to the west, formerly space for low-income housing buildings, long torn down. To the east is Jumbo Bar, very busy on payday, slow but steady on other days. Closer to King, an old brick apartment complex stands, and just east of the Dewey Center, lines form for meals twice a day at the Detroit Rescue Mission: “The Bible Says Christ Died for Our Sins,” the sign outside it reads. Next door stands Bill’s Recreation: Pocket Billiards. On the street outside a man with one leg

sits on the ground leaning back against the building, looking down the street, not expectantly, clenching and unclenching one fist.

Across the street and north a few yards, in one vacant lot less than 150 yards from the steps of the Dewey Center, a fire burns every day and night, fueled by wood from an abandoned house nearby. Day and night several homeless men and women huddle around this fire, and sometimes when these men and women get very cold they take the fire inside the house; the building bears the scars of several fires which have been set on its floors by a scattering of homeless people, who may seem to the casual observer beyond hope. More than pain here, yes, but still, mostly pain.

After we had attended several sessions in Toby and Debi's whole-language seminar, George Cooper and I conducted a workshop for the seminar in which participants interviewed a woman who was a long-term resident of the Cass Corridor community. We wrote about the interview and explored possibilities for developing closer ties between the school and the community. We were joined in our participation in this workshop by Susan Harris, a former urban school-teacher, administrator, and graduate student, whom we had asked to join us in teaching the summer program.

At this workshop, Jeanetta Cotman, a nineteen-year veteran fifth-grade teacher in the Couzens School, and its teachers' union representative for most of those years, approached George about teaching in the summer program. Characterizing herself as a "traditional" teacher who did not make extensive use of writing in her classes, Jeanetta indicated she was enthusiastic about what she was hearing; she wanted to learn more about what she considered a promising approach to teaching literacy. Several weeks later, we asked Dana Davidson to join us as well. A 1985 graduate of Detroit's Cass Tech High School and 1989 graduate of the University of Michigan in English, Dana had been one of the students in my teacher preparation classes, and I knew her to be committed to teaching in Detroit's inner-city.<sup>2</sup> We also asked Markus Müller, a University of Michigan undergraduate who had worked for many years with Detroit teenagers through his church's youth programs, to assist us with word processing and desktop publishing.

We were seven teachers: four from the University of Michigan (George Cooper, Dana Davidson, Susan Harris, and I), three from the Detroit public schools (Toby Curry, Debi Goodman, and Jeanetta Cotman); four white (George, Toby, Debi, and I) and three black (Susan, Jeanetta, and Dana); three each with more than fifteen years'

extensive experience teaching in Detroit's inner city (Toby, Debi, and Jeanetta), and the rest of us new to teaching in Detroit, although Dana had grown up and gone to school in the area and Susan had been an urban school administrator. George and I had ten and fifteen years teaching experience, respectively, in high schools and universities, but not in Detroit.

We began recruiting students from three Jeffries community schools, including Edmonson elementary, where we spoke with fifth graders; Burton International School, the magnet school where Toby and Debi had been teaching; and the Couzens School, soon to be the Dewey Center, where we concentrated our recruiting efforts. We gave special attention to attracting students to our program who were identified by their teachers as "at risk," and who might be struggling in school in various ways. We agreed that the majority of the students should live in or near the Jeffries projects, and we decided to place an emphasis in our recruitment on boys because teachers there felt that boys in particular were less likely to graduate from school than girls. We also defined the fifth through seventh grades as crucial for students if their commitment to learning was to continue into high school and their adult years. Referring to the great numbers of students of color who were dropping out of school in Detroit's inner city, one teacher said, "By ninth grade, they're gone."

Our recruiting efforts in the winter 1989 term involved several visits to the schools and some Saturday planning meetings for students and teachers, where we repeatedly underscored our intent to develop the project in a collaborative fashion with both students and teachers. Understandably, students were not only dubious about our promises and unfamiliar with our way of talking about learning, but also unaccustomed to participating overtly in curriculum planning; however, they were curious, and their interest in the project grew slowly and steadily.

We knew our Saturday meetings would compete with television and other nonschool activities, and we knew the summer program might seem like more school work to students who already feel out of place in school. Why volunteer for more school? What could it do for them? Why should they stay in school, and not simply drop out? Did a high school diploma offer them the prospect of jobs, security, even a sense of well-being and self-confidence? We knew that the possibility of gang membership, for instance, might offer more sense of community and a more immediate sense of power than the classroom for some of these students. These children know, too, that they could earn a lot of money by dealing drugs for these gangs. "What you



gonna pay me to come in your program, man?" one sixth grader asked me. Defiantly, he cocked the hat teachers had repeatedly asked him to remove. To be an author, to be a student, would likely look dull compared to other, flashier demonstrations of "success." What could we offer him of any substance to give him hope to change his life? Could we promise him that writing in our program would somehow change the circumstances in his life? Knowing something of the complexity of his and his friends' lives, we weren't at all sure that we could give him any answers he would find acceptable.

The initial enthusiasm for our project came from girls who liked to write and who were generally successful in school. In the end, thirty students signed up: eleven boys, nineteen girls; ten students who actually lived in the Projects, almost all of the others living nearby in the Cass Corridor; twelve from the Dewey Center and other projects area schools, eighteen from Burton International School; many of them current or former students from Toby and Debi's classes. Nineteen of the students were black, eight white, two Latino, one Asian; there were thirteen fifth graders, eleven sixth graders, and six seventh graders. Many joked in ways similar to the way the young man I described joked, and they skipped our planning meetings.

As teachers informed by several discussions with students, we agreed to emphasize several issues in our collaborative planning of the summer project. Although we agreed to encourage students to write at least one piece "about the community," we wanted to encourage writing about topics and in forms that the students would choose themselves and to provide as many occasions as possible for talk to inform students' writing. For instance, by inviting various community members to be interviewed by the students, we hoped this interchange would invite student writing. We planned to take advantage of the ideal four-to-one student-teacher ratio and to give students an opportunity to talk frequently with various teachers about their writing. We planned daily, small-group writers' workshop sessions where students could, if they wished, share and critique each other's writing at every stage of the process. We wanted to break down some usual barriers: between parents and the classroom, between teachers and students, between the school and the community. Most of us dressed informally and agreed to be addressed by our first names, and we wrote every day with the students. Parents and neighbors were invited to drop in and participate at any time of the day; we planned to invite published writers to participate and conduct workshops and readings for us. We agreed to provide as many

occasions as possible for writing, including keeping journals. We wanted to involve students in every aspect of the decision-making process, to help them claim ownership of their writing and of the workshop itself. By avoiding presentations or talks about aspects of writing we could instead talk about an individual student's writing in our responses to their writing.

We wanted to get out of the school, too, to visit community sites, to allow for those experiences to provide possibilities for writing. We planned every day to meet with the students; each afternoon, the teachers would meet to discuss the morning's work and plan the next day. Initially, we planned the first two days and "roughed in" some later events that would require transportation; the last week was left free for writing, revision, and desk-top publishing. We agreed to construct a general plan, but also agreed to be flexible, to be willing to abandon any plan for the needs of the particular situation, and the needs of individual students. We also decided to conduct "teacher research" into our own practices by constructing an archive of our work in journals, audiotapes, videotapes, and drafts of student writing. Many of us stated our desire to write about some aspects of the project; there was even some talk of a "teacher book" that we might write (and have subsequently planned) as a companion to the "student book" that would emerge from the project. The planning was filled with excitement and good intentions. Caring as we each did in our different ways about how we should proceed and how we could best teach our particular group of children, we found ourselves daily in passionate intellectual discussions—discussions often characterized by conflict. To understand how our "interpretive community" of teachers got formed in terms of the work we did with our students, it is crucial to realize the creative tension between our good intentions to make the collaborative teaching work and our differences of opinion about how that work should get accomplished.

#### THE DEWEY CENTER COMMUNITY WRITING PROJECT, 1989

##### THE CASS CORRIDOR

*James Cook*

If I could write about any community in Detroit, it would be the Cass Corridor. Because of drugs and unemployment, many people moved away. But at one time, there were more people on Brainard Street between Second and Third than in most small