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Street Art as Public Pedagogy & Community Literacy: What Walls Can Teach Us

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Abstract

This essay analyzes the street art project Stop Telling Women to Smile (STWTS) to argue that public art plays an essential, pedagogical role in enhancing literacy education and intercultural communication within our communities. Functioning as both a public pedagogy and community literacy, STWTS demonstrates the power of public art to address injustice and provoke community conversation. To conclude, the essay calls literacy educators to expand the sites of pedagogy to include the everyday literacies students encounter within local public spaces.

Keywords: Public pedagogy, community literacy, street art, public space, literacy education

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What can we learn about literacy and education from public art in public space? Large murals, sculptures, architecturally designed gardens—even, in some cases, posters or graffiti—are forms of public art that I believe play an essential, pedagogical role in enhancing literacy education and intercultural communication within our communities. We can learn something from the art we encounter in public spaces, if we are open enough to approach them as educational sites. Transcending mere decoration, public art provides opportunities for engaging important social issues by offering vital commentary, provoking community conversation, and helping citizens move toward mutual understanding and respect despite our differences.

Stop Telling Women to Smile

I began to see the power of public art when I hosted a visiting artist at my university in spring of 2014. Tatyana Fazlalizadeh visited Georgia State University, an urban public research institution located in downtown Atlanta, to give a lecture and to wheat paste posters throughout the Atlanta metro area as part of her Stop Telling Women to Smile (hereafter, STWTS) project. As an illustrator and painter based in Brooklyn, Fazlalizadeh's works often tackle issues of race, politics, gender, and/or sexual orientation, connecting with national and international current events. For instance, Fazlalizadeh (2014a) explained that her painting series Get Angry was "inspired by the numerous outbreaks of protests and revolutions in 2011. From Tahrir Sq to Wall St, from London to Troy Davis, from Slutwalk to the demand for gay marriage rights." More recently, Fazlalizadeh has been producing public art projects primarily in urban spaces. In 2013, for example, she was commissioned for and completed a large-scale mural in Philadelphia honoring the hip-hop band The Roots.

Figure 1. Tatyana Fazlalizadeh wheat pasting in downtown Atlanta. Photo taken by author and used with permission.

While her artistic background is in illustrations and painting, Fazlalizadeh has perhaps garnered most of her public attention—coverage in *The New York Times*, National Public Radio, *The Guardian*, *Ebony*, and *Mother Jones*, to name a few—through the street art project STWTS, which she began in Brooklyn in the fall of 2012. STWTS was born out of the idea that public art can be an impactful tool for addressing gender-based street harassment, in this case by wheat pasting portraits of women paired with phrases that speak back to offenders. In her lecture at Georgia State University, Fazlalizadeh (2014b) described a bit of her process. She first interviews a woman who has experienced street harassment. Fazlalizadeh then sketches the woman, incorporating a quote from her subject within the work. In addition to the phrase that has become the project's namesake, Fazlalizadeh's posters include such sayings as: "My name is not

baby"; "I am not your property. You are not in control of my body"; and "Women are not outside for your entertainment." Fazlalizadeh pastes her posters in legal or illegal public spaces where street harassment abounds and/or in locations where the women whom she has interviewed have experienced verbal harassment. Sometimes Fazlalizadeh's legal wheat pasting is advertised as a public event and members of the local community join her, as in the case of her visit to Georgia State University. Wheat paste, an adhesive made from wheat flour and water, is a poster-hanging technique often preferred by activists because it does not damage property permanently and it "is not illegal in every city" (Salzman, 2003, p. 253). Moreover, wheat paste easily peels away if the poster is apprehended while in the act of illegally pasting. While the project began in Brooklyn, she has spent the last year taking STWTS across the country to cities like Los Angeles and Baltimore, occasionally connecting with local college populations as she did at Georgia State University in Atlanta and Northeastern University in Boston.

Public Pedagogy and Community Literacy

Using STWTS as a case study, I aim to suggest how public art projects can operate as both public pedagogy and community literacy. Henry A. Giroux (1999/2006), cultural studies and educational theorist, examined public pedagogy in relation to the ways corporations, such as The Walt Disney Company, circulate public messages that "profoundly influence children's culture and their everyday life" (p. 219). Part of what most concerned Giroux is how these public messages serve a pedagogic function, educating youth into a commercialistic understanding of the world that "limits the vocabulary and imagery available . . . for defining, defending, and reforming the state, civil society, and public cultures as centers for critical learning and citizenship" (p. 228). For Giroux, preserving democracy and our roles as active, engaged citizens

means paying attention to "how we educate our youth" through "the stories that are told in the noncommodified spheres of our public culture" (p. 228).

Street art projects like STWTS circulate within noncommodified public spheres and, thus, serve a vital role in telling local stories from the voices and perspectives of those who live within that community. Moreover, the stories communicated through STWTS work as a form of public pedagogy that educates local community members in a number of ways: 1) by documenting and highlighting the problem of street harassment; 2) by placing the faces and words of women directly into public spaces; 3) by speaking back to both offenders and potential offenders; and, 4) by providing women and others with the language to defend themselves against future street harassment. In other words, wheat-pasted posters that say "You are not entitled to my space" or "My outfit is not an invitation" educate local communities by telling a different side of the street harassment story: one that goes beyond the harasser's verbalized assault to publicly document an often silenced response by the harassed. While most immediately engaging passers-by in the local community, the counter-narrative represented in STWTS posters also speaks to larger cultural conversations about harassment and other forms of gendered abuse, challenging assumptions that implicate women as in some way inviting or provoking harassment. As a public text—a visual composition—the circulation of STWTS posters works rhetorically to address local problems and move communities toward social change.

Figure 2. Graduate students and the author wheat pasting as part of the Stop Telling Women to Smile project in downtown Atlanta. From left to right: Laura Anderson, Valerie Robin, and Ashley Holmes. Photo used with permission.

In addition to functioning as a public pedagogy, STWTS also represents a literate practice—an act of public community literacy that demands engagement across difference. In *Community literacy and the rhetoric of public engagement*, Linda Flower (2008) argued for the importance of "engaging with difference" in public spaces (p. 2). Part of this public engagement entails entering "a contact zone where differences are made visible and where assumptions and identities are called into question" (p. 2). Like Giroux, Flower spoke to the potential of noncommodified public spaces, contending that a rhetoric of public engagement "challenges images of a media-controlled public sphere" (p. 6). Flower's conception of community literacy hinges on the idea of *local* publics and counterpublics (Fraser, 1990; Long, 2008; Warner, 2005) in which issues, ideas, and identities circulate and resonate in localized ways, further countering grand narratives that are often represented in media-controlled publics. Because of the ways that

STWTS circulates its messages within local public spaces, it invites citizens to engage differences and question assumptions that are relevant to the members of that particular community. By physically taking up public space, the posters confront members of the community and provoke attention. In fact, when I helped Fazlalizadeh wheat-paste posters in downtown Atlanta, a man called down from his balcony across the street, questioning "Stop telling women to smile? Why?" Before the pastings were even completed, community members within this local public sphere were prompted to consider issues of gender-based street harassment, to question things they may take for granted like the seemingly harmless idea of telling a woman to smile. As a form of community literacy, the street art project STWTS employs community-based literacies that can lead to a rhetoric of public engagement.

Going Public with Literacy Education

While some literacy educators view the classroom itself as a public space, many others are going public, moving outside of the academy to partner with community groups and/or assigning students to examine public art and spaces. The "sites of pedagogy"—which Jeffrey R. Di Leo, Walter R. Jacobs, and Amy Lee (2002) defined as "the locations of pedagogical address . . . the spaces in which interactions between teacher and student occur" (p. 7)—are changing and becoming increasingly public. This more inclusive and expansive view of valuable sites of pedagogy helps counter biases Di Leo, Jacobs, and Lee (2002) identified within education—biases that "promote beliefs about what a true classroom is as opposed to its false instantiations (e.g., computer-screens, televisions and shopping malls)" (p. 10). Similarly, I believe that approaching our community walls as valuable sites for education, perhaps equally or more so than the four walls of traditional classroom spaces, will lead to more meaningful learning. Such an approach to literacy education implies viewing public art as a significant act of literacy—texts

for students to analyze, create, and circulate—and approaching our surrounding communities and public spaces as an educational canvas.

Middle and secondary school teachers interested in expanding their pedagogy to include analysis of or engagement with more local, public sites can assign students to "excavate" their "everyday life" experiences (Mauk, 2003, p. 362) or write "in the wild" (Bjork & Pedro Schwartz, 2009, p. 225). Excavating one's everyday experiences might involve students interviewing friends and family for their perspective or expertise on a topic being studied in class. As Jonathan Mauk (2003) argued, a personal interview assignment encourages students to use "academic tools within their nonacademic lives" (p. 362), moving the realm of valuable pedagogical address beyond solely the classroom, the teacher, or the library. Another assignment, for which Olin Bjork and John Pedro Schwartz (2009) advocate, invites students to visit places of rhetorical activity, such as "city parks, waiting rooms, [or] shopping malls" (p. 224) to observe, research, and write in public locations. Because these public locations are "untamed for writing," Bjork and Pedro Schwartz (2009) characterize them as field sites within "the wild" (p. 225), further emphasizing the separation from a traditional classroom learning space. Rather than requiring young students to venture to new locations, teachers can prompt students to be more observant during their out-of-school experiences, maintaining their critical and analytical eye within what are typically considered non-academic spaces.

Students might also examine their community for street or public art, such as murals, sculptures, gardens, memorials, posters, or perhaps even graffiti. Teachers can prompt in-class debate and discussion about the role public art can have in conveying social and public messages, as well as the potential for being aesthetically pleasing (or disruptive). Students might debate questions such as the following:

- What characteristics distinguish a public work as art?
- What message is being communicated through the piece of street art?
- What does this message suggest about the community in which we live?

While considering street art within their local community, students might also examine national or international examples of street art such as the STWTS project, the Wall Hunter's Slumlord Project out of Baltimore (Rojo & Harrington, 2013), or works by graffiti artists such as Banksy (Banksy, 2014) or Alec Monopoly (Rolfes, 2013). Activities that prompt students to see everyday, local public spaces as pedagogical help promote the idea that students can learn from the people and places within their communities and that their lived experiences can become the basis for future advocacy efforts.

While the specific topic of street harassment or possible illegal street art may be too risky for some educators, secondary English teacher Fred Barton (2005) determined that entirely risk-free advocacy topics do not actually exist. Having his students engage with public issues, writing, and advocacy, Barton recounted how he ended up in the principal's office on a number of occasions. Even a topic as seemingly tame as greyhound racing in a state that does not allow racing resulted in red flags from his administrators. Instead of abandoning advocacy in the secondary classroom, though, Barton suggested that teachers consider the "degree of organized resistance" (p. 75) to issues, and he developed a "continuum of risk" (p. 76) to guide his classroom advocacy projects, listing youth programs as low risk and reproductive rights as high risk. He situated topics such as animal rights somewhere in the middle, noting that spay/neuter awareness may be low risk while humane treatment of animals in factory farms may be higher risk.

Teachers interested in working with projects like STWTS and gender-based street harassment may encounter additional challenges. Public pedagogies, like the STWTS posters, located on community walls may be short-lived, painted over, vandalized, or pulled down within days or weeks. However, we might use public art projects like STWTS as an opportunity to discuss the dynamic nature of literacy and learning, especially within community-based contexts. In fact, in Fazlalizadeh's lecture, she used examples of vandalism on her STWTS posters as another opportunity for pedagogic intervention. She displayed a series of pictures that documented how viewers were wrestling with the content, debating its value in quick exchanges handwritten on the poster itself. Speaking about these handwritten messages, Fazlalizadeh told CNN (2014), "That's great . . . because that's what the project aims to do: inspire discussion and hopefully collaboration among the sexes." In other words, while the poster was ultimately defaced with a graphic phallic drawing, the engagement of passers-by suggests a step forward, a community discussion being initiated, even if that discussion is ugly, complicated, and unresolved.

The case study of STWTS also calls literacy educators to reconsider the changing nature of authorship, the significance of circulation (compared to production) of literate texts, and the use of social media and digital documentation rather than print or museum-based preservation. Because Fazlalizadeh scans the sketched posters, creating a digital file that she then prints in various sizes for pasting, these literate texts are easily circulated through her public website—downloadable and printable for potentially any Web user. Moreover, the method of wheat pasting is fairly accessible and affordable, making wide public circulation, well beyond what the artist herself could feasibly undertake, a real possibility. While Fazlalizadeh does not release all of her prints for public consumption and reproduction, she published a select series of STWTS

posters for wheat pasting across the globe as part of International Anti-Street Harassment Week in 2014. Similarly, Fazlalizadeh's (2014a) website currently showcases a poster she created of Mike Brown with the hashtag #JusticeForMikeBrown, directing users to "Download, print, keep on." With the influx of new technologies, artists, musicians, and writers are increasingly making their work publicly available. For literacy educators, the open access movement prompts us to prepare our students for diverse forms of writing, reading, and publishing.

Conclusion

Expanding our sites of pedagogy to include public spaces and public art provides us with the opportunity to highlight for students not only how literacy permeates our everyday lives but also how community literacy—in this case, as street art in public spaces—represents a valuable public pedagogy that can help us communicate more effectively across difference. Moreover, studying and participating in public art projects like STWTS helps communicate the power of literacy within local public communities when texts are circulated to speak back to injustice. Valuing public sites of pedagogy also reminds students that the best learning does not always happen within the four walls of a classroom. It reminds them to look at the walls they pass on the way to school, to listen to the stories within their communities, and to find lessons in the everyday texts they read and write.

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