Tactics of Hope

The Public Turn in English Composition

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“We’re Not Cops, We’re from the University”

In the 1992 horror film *Candyman*, two aspiring academics, Helen Lyle (Virginia Madsen) and Bernadette Walsh (Kasi Lemmons), land on a thesis topic that leads them to Chicago’s Cabrini Green public housing project in search of data about a local urban legend. As only Hollywood can, this film depicts doctoral research in what appears to be an Urban Legends Department, filled with faculty lecturing to packed classes. Receiving a tip from a black cleaning woman on campus, the two graduate students rush to Cabrini Green in hopes of debunking the legend of the Candyman, which the project residents purportedly believe. Without invitation or permission, the two enter one of the high-rise buildings and climb several flights of the stairs (the elevator is of course not working), walking past graffitied walls and many African American residents. Lyle, who is white, and Walsh, who is black, are both dressed smartly in long coats, slacks, and heels; they express relief when the building’s residents mistake them for the “5-0” (police).

Once upstairs, they enter an abandoned apartment, the scene of an alleged Candyman attack, search it, and take photographs as data for their research. A next-door neighbor, Ann-Marie McCoy (Vanessa Williams), a young African American woman dressed for work as a hospital orderly and carrying an infant, stands in the doorway and confronts them. “What you all doing in there?” she asks.

Although happy to be mistaken for the police a moment earlier, Lyle now seeks to assure McCoy of the opposite, saying, “We’re not cops; we’re from the university.”

McCoy seems annoyed and says so: “Well, you don’t belong here, lady. You don’t belong going through people’s apartments and things.”

Lyle then walks toward her, speaking deliberately: “My name is Helen Lyle and this is Bernadette Walsh. We’re doing a thesis.” She says the word “thesis” slowly to draw out the syllables, underscoring its foreignness in the dingy, abandoned apartment where they stand. “And we were wondering if we could just talk to you for a few minutes. Here, this is my card.” Not unlike a cop flashing her badge, Lyle
presents a business card that confirms her affiliation with a different state apparatus, the local university. Lyle’s calm confidence is offset by the uncomfortable demeanor of Walsh, her African American research partner, who quietly apologizes to McCoy and unconvincingly urges Lyle to the door.

McCoy remains suspicious and critical: “So you say you’re doing a study. What you gonna study? That we’re all bad? That we steal? We gang bang? We’re all on drugs, right?” And when she begrudgingly agrees to talk to the researchers, she adds, “You know, whites don’t never come here except to cause us a problem.”

Lyle confidently replies, “Believe me; that’s not what we want to do.” As any horror fan knows, her assured tone, which is not unfamiliar to university faculty, inevitably foreshadows death and disaster. And in the ensuing scenes of Candyman, horrible things do happen, especially to Lyle and Walsh.

Despite its sometimes cartoonish and often very grim horror, Candyman offers a useful scene for excavating the tacit assumptions underlying much university work in the streets outside of campus. Lyle caricatures an academic entitled by race and cultural capital who launches thoughtlessly into unfamiliar streets and buildings, focused solely on her work, damn the consequences for others or even herself. Without any relationship or even permission, she embarks on her project and expects others outside of campus to help. She has no understanding of McCoy’s mistrust and apprehension or a sense of why people might be suspicious of working with universities.

The film resonates with me personally because it was filmed in Chicago (where I grew up) on the very campus where I did my graduate work. It was released the year I began getting involved in local writing projects outside of campus. And like the thesis of the fictional researchers, my work on occasion brought me to Cabrini Green. So, for me, this unattractive Hollywood portrayal of a graduate student in the street landed literally a little too close to home.

I wanted to dismiss Helen Lyle as a Hollywood distortion. Clearly “we”—real-life teachers, writers, and scholars who connect academic teaching and research with local communities—know better. Or is it too easy to feel superior to the fictional researchers? Perhaps these Hollywood doppelgangers resemble real academics and students more than we want to admit.

While obviously exaggerated, this scene in Candyman highlights several problems that can arise when even well-intentioned academics or students hit the streets. Lyle and Walsh meant no harm. They had a research plan (at least the Hollywood version of a research plan—they talked with faculty and went to the library, once). Their interest in the urban legends circulated by residents of Cabrini Green would have
added to a scholarly body of work. Unfortunately, their plan and actions assumed and relied upon cooperation of Cabrini residents, who had no voice in the planning or decision to go ahead with this project. Absent an ongoing relationship and a shared vision of work with those in the streets, academics and students can too easily create horror stories of our own, filled with misunderstandings, missed opportunities, and bitterness.

Universities in the Streets

Many disciplines within the university, especially English composition, now foster initiatives that send students, teachers, and researchers out of the classroom and into “the streets.” Too often, teachers send students where they themselves seldom go. Or they might plan their research and teaching agendas first and then seek out suitable “sites” in the street to do that work. At best, academics ask local agencies how they or their students can help meet agency needs. But how often is our asking much better than that of the researchers in Candyman?

When students and teachers move from the classroom to the streets, many questions arise or should arise: How well do we know our local communities and how well known are we in them? Are those outside the university eager or reluctant to work with us? How prepared are we to go through the process of learning how to understand and respond to local needs? Do we know how to frame questions in useful ways and listen for answers, even ones we might not like? How well do we understand how public discourse operates in our communities? How well can we present or represent local issues in our classrooms? In short, how well can academics see beyond our own good intentions to assess how our work resonates with those in the streets? As the field of composition turns its attention more and more to local street life, teachers and scholars will need to examine more questions like these in order to evaluate how our missions, projects, research, writing, and teaching play to those in the streets whom we purport to serve.

What the ill-fated academics in Candyman failed to recognize is that place matters, as does time. Moving from the university to the streets means that the rules that prevail in the classroom or the dean’s office no longer apply. As academics increasingly seek “placements” in the community for their students or for their own research, a need to understand the politics and dynamics of place—as well as time—are paramount.

Composition as a field has begun taking serious account of the spaces and spatial politics involved in the research and pedagogy of teaching writing. While important theoretical research seeks to
understand street locations as unique entities, more work is necessary to appreciate how the streets differ from institutional spaces like universities and schools. Rather than relying on the strategies that usually work in classrooms and on campuses, academics in the streets need to understand the spatial politics around them and call on the tactics available in a given time and place.4

**A Word on the Word Street**

As I discuss in Chapter 1, a wide range of teaching practices and campus initiatives bring the work of college students and faculty beyond the boundaries of classroom and campus walls. But what can we call that beyond space? Describing or naming “out there” has proven difficult and theoretically unsatisfactory for many writers and scholars. I have chosen street as the metonymic reference point for those places outside of universities and schools that have become sites of research, outreach, service, or local learning. Street may refer to a specific neighborhood, community center, school, or local nonprofit organization. Like all the other possible terms (such as community, sites of service, contact zones, outreach site, etc.), street is a problematic term, but it is one whose problems, I hope, help illuminate the difficulties associated with academic outreach. Before discussing street, I will briefly mention why the other terms seem more problematic.

Joseph Harris chose community as one of the key terms reflective of dominant pedagogical approaches to composition since the mid-1960s. But as Harris points out, community connotes a misleading sense of unity. In Keywords, Raymond Williams describes community as the “warmly persuasive” term that “unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society) . . . never [seems] to be used unfavourably” (76). Because of the persuasive warmth of community, it is difficult to see such a site as uncommunal, complex, or conflictual. In addition, as Harris shows, community can mean any group, inside or outside the academy, thus making terms like community literacy or community-based writing ambiguous or possibly euphemistic.

Mary Louise Pratt’s nuanced configuration, contact zone, offers a theoretically rich term, which is useful in explicating the dynamics of a place.5 However, contact zone, like community, is a broad term that lacks a specific geographic referent, in that contact zones can exist in classrooms as well as in streets, historical periods, etc. Plus, contact zone carries a whiff of academic jargon that makes its practical usefulness questionable. For example, “I’m doing research in my local contact zone” is a sentence determined not to roll off the tongue comfortably. Nor is it likely that most people would appreciate having their local
neighborhood referred to as a contact zone, which sounds similar to combat zone, especially to residents in the Boston area, where I now work. Alternative terms such as non-academic, outreach, and extracurricular describe “the out-there places” in relation to what they are not—the university—which invokes the binary town-gown, assigning the university as the normal term of comparison and relegating the town to relational status.

Likewise, describing a location as a site of service reverberates in a range of troubling ways. Service implies “good works,” and often calls up visions of unequal power, with an individual in a superior position of strength helping another who is presumed weaker or deficient. In a different way, some worry that for young people the term service now often names mandatory “volunteer” work they must do in schools or calls up images of the “court-ordered community service” that movie and rock stars must carry out, mostly for drug crimes. The concept “service,” like that of excellence, is an empty signifier, one which posits the existence of a generic category of something positive and useful—which would require a neutral and uninterested political point from which to judge.

I somewhat reluctantly adopt street as the spatial metaphor for the destination of academic outreach and service learning, because although it is also problematic, its problems seem generative. Street implies urban, which itself has been considered a racist euphemism for black. “Urban music,” for example, is marketing code for “black music.” “Urban renewal,” studies show, has been used euphemistically to signify removal of black residents from neighborhoods to pave the way for gentrification (e.g., Shareef 2001). Street carries connotations of homelessness, gangs, and poverty. Wealthy people tend not to spend much time in the streets, and when they do it’s often within regulated and semiprivatized spaces, such as gated communities or sidewalks in gentrified neighborhoods.

As universities create local and public initiatives, aren’t the streets largely where we and our students are heading to read, to write, and to serve? Prisons, homeless shelters, learning centers in poor neighborhoods, community newspapers, and small nonprofits tend to be where students work in service-learning projects. When teachers bring “local life” into the classroom, it is more often ethnic literature, ethnographies of people living in marginalized situations, and theories of subordinated groups than critical studies of powerful groups like CEOs, country clubs, or slumlords. The lives of lower-income people tend to be more public or accessible to academics than the lives of the wealthy. In other words, it is much easier to gain street access than boardroom access. At the same time, however, use of the word street is tricky, especially from the computer of an academic; it risks replicating the racist
rhetoric of urban renewal that it seeks to critique by viewing the streets as a monolithic entity. Many locations in neighborhoods are defined explicitly as sites that are not part of the streets, like centers that offer positive alternatives for youth.

With increasing interest in public initiatives, writing instruction today is deeply implicated in complications of race and class and institutional power, and the ethical problems are complex. In choosing the term street, I certainly do not solve these problems but rather seek to continually remind myself and others that taking our teaching and learning to the streets has serious implications.

**Goals of This Book**

The central argument of Tactics of Hope is that the field of English composition has taken a turn to the streets, which has broad implications for the organization and assessment of writing, teaching, and research. I argue that thus far composition’s public initiatives have relied primarily on strategic logics—proceeding as if the university were the controlling institution determining movements and interactions. A strategic orientation seeks to control spaces and create institutional relationships with an “other” in the community. Strategic development of initiatives, like service learning, seek objective calculations of success and thus rely on spatial markers like sustainability and measurable student outcomes as guidelines of success.

The problem lies in the fact that universities or other educational institutions do not have strategic control over the streets. Try as one might to create “clients” or “partners” in the name of institutional partnerships, the everyday workings of street life are more complex, with multiple sources of power (Harper et al. 2003). The institutional reach of universities cannot contain street life within a strategic orientation. The more we try to institutionalize the relationships between universities and neighboring streets and communities, the farther we stray from a rhetorically responsive engagement that seeks timely partnerships, which acknowledge the ever-changing spatial terrain, temporal opportunities, and voices of individuals. The more we rely on strategic models, which seek stability instead of specificity, the more marginalized and disregarded will be the everyday voices and opinions of those in the streets and neighborhoods we seek to serve. The following chapters recount several horror stories—not from film but real life—that illustrate the gaps that can occur between a university’s understanding of its own work and its reception in the streets outside of campus.

In opposition to a strategic orientation, I argue on behalf of a tactical orientation, which understands both temporal and spatial politics.
University-community partnerships, in a tactical orientation, would necessarily be rhetorical and changing. Rather than scientific measures of success, street initiatives would operate situationally, grounded in both time and place.

Adopting a tactical orientation in a university setting means letting go of comfortable claims of certainty and accepting the contingent and vexed nature of our actions. A tactical orientation needs to be grounded in hope, not cast in naive or passive terms, but hope as a critical, active, dialectical engagement between the insufficient present and possible, alternative futures—a dialogue composed of many voices.

This book examines a trend within higher education to connect with local communities, and in doing so, seeks to amplify the voices of those who have worked with university courses but are not of or in the university: people in local neighborhoods, communities, and streets who accommodate, become involved with, and with any luck, benefit from university outreach and publicly oriented courses. I do not claim that the information I present here is either exhaustive or necessarily generalizable; rather, I have compiled a collection of memories, interviews, and personal reflections of various nonprofit workers and activists (including myself). This book acts as a metonymic gesture to stand in for the many, many voices teachers and scholars need to be hearing and learning from if we decide to venture into the streets.

In Chapter 1, “Composition in the Streets,” I catalogue the various initiatives through which writing instructors, students, and researchers have connected with the streets outside of campus, which together constitutes what I call a public turn for composition studies. I outline various initiatives that seem to me part of this public turn, including bringing classroom writing to the streets via public writing, bringing street life into the classroom through course content, sending students into the streets through service learning, and encouraging teachers/writers/scholars to connect their work to the streets. I explore the history and motivations of this public turn in composition and argue that despite this radical changing of places, we continue to rely on strategic rather than tactical guidelines for organizing and assessing our work. Beyond critiquing this approach, I offer an alternative configuration for examining and understanding street initiatives as tactics of hope, by relying on theories of tactics by Michel de Certeau and writings on hope by several theorists, including Ernst Bloch.

Chapter 2, “Writing in the Streets,” explores public writing in classrooms and argues that our teaching can be informed and enriched by public writing already occurring in the streets. Through the examples of writers at community newspapers and activist organizations, I outline public writing as tactical and seek ways to connect lessons of tactical writing to classroom projects.
Chapter 3, “Street Life in the Classroom,” examines university classes that include local issues and literature as course content. As a case study for this chapter, I discuss a course I have taught, Literatures of Homelessness, in which I have relied on the help and advice of local community activists.

Chapter 4, “Students in the Streets,” reports some of the apprehension and dissatisfaction many community members feel toward university-initiated service learning projects. I argue that the push to institutionalize service learning, which dominates the current literature, risks further alienating community members by relying on strategic rather than tactical measures for design and assessment. I offer examples of tactical service projects that may not be as large or sustainable as strategic programs but may be more accountable.

The book concludes with “Teachers/Writers/Scholars in the Streets,” which examines recent calls to expand the public role of English language and literature scholars and argues that, despite this interest, academic scholarship is largely evaluated by strategic, disciplinary measures. I share the story of a community group embittered by a partnership that gave them nothing but helped an academic improve his publishing profile. To counter this horror story, I share examples of three personal academic heroes who, to me, embody tactical views of working and rely on hope to continue each day. I conclude the book with a meditation on hope and how it can inform our work in the streets.

The Streets Where I Live

Before moving to Chapter 1, I want to share something about the streets where I live and work. For the past seven years I have worked with one foot in the university, as a graduate student and now assistant professor, and the other in the nonprofit sector, as a teacher, writer, editor, and administrator at two street newspapers, which are organizations that provide income and a public voice to people who are homeless or living in poverty. As a graduate student, I studied composition theory at the same time I was teaching writing to homeless men and women and receiving offers from local universities to create service-learning partnerships. As an assistant professor, I left my hometown and relocated to a new city and tried to initiate work at a different street paper, defining new roles and projects based on local needs and cultures. During these years, I have designed and taught university-writing courses at two very different institutions (an urban state university and an affluent Jesuit university) that engage social issues both in the classroom and in the streets.
Working both for small nonprofits and universities, I have been able to see the public gestures of writing faculty and students from two angles simultaneously. This double perspective has allowed me to see the limitations and promise of writing and service goals as articulated by the university. I have also seen how local realities often require that ideas about writing, pedagogy, and service be defined differently than in universities.

**On Street Papers, Gingerbread Men, and Hope**

The most important lessons about writing I have learned come from working with writers who are or have been homeless. Everything I know about teaching writing and community partnerships has been filtered through, informed, challenged, and extended by my seven-years’ work with the international grassroots movement of street newspapers. More than 100 street papers operate as independent media organizations in 27 countries on six continents. Built on the principle of self-help, street papers give people living in poverty the chance to earn an income by selling high-quality, alternative magazines and newspapers to the reading public. Many street papers also provide an outlet for socially excluded people to articulate their views of the world and to claim a voice in the public media.

While acting independently, most of the world’s street papers belong to a common network, the International Network of Street Papers (INSP). The INSP supports its member papers as they create social businesses that aim “to alleviate poverty and build a just, civil society in the world.” INSP articulates its vision as both local and global, by “changing the world one street paper at a time.”

A typical street paper operates this way: A person who is living in poverty or needing work can come to a street-paper office, attend an orientation session, and receive a badge and a number of free papers to sell. Subsequently, vendors purchase copies of the paper at a reduced price (usually a quarter to half of the cover price) and sell them to the public at the cover price—usually a dollar or two—keeping the proceeds. Street papers provide a modest job to anyone wanting to work, and also work for longer-term systemic change through international lobbying efforts and the pages of their newspapers and magazines. INSP has recently gained consultative status with the United Nations, is creating an international news service, and takes part in international summits like the World Social Forum and World Economic Forum.

I would like to pass along a story to you, a story told to me by Layla Mewburn from *Big Issue Scotland*, who heard it from Robert Sztarovics from *Novy Prostor* in Prague, which as he tells it, is based on a lesson he
learned from his mother. It’s a story that figured centrally in the planning of the 2003 INSP conference in Prague, where I retold the story to a plenary session of roughly 70 delegates from street papers in 27 countries. Perhaps the story has been repeated since then. It describes the spirit of the street-paper movement, which is not based on charity but on tactical projects that create social opportunities. This story—and all my experiences with street papers—has helped clarify my understanding of creating university partnerships that I call tactical projects; it has also taught me a great deal about hope.

The teller of the story—Robert, Layla, me, or you—begins by drawing the figure of a body. It looks a bit like a gingerbread man:

![Gingerbread Man Diagram]

This is a body. It can be the body of an individual—a student, a homeless person, a university president—or it can represent a collective body, such as a class, a group of homeless writers, a local community group, or the street-paper movement. The sun in the middle represents the body’s essence, or soul. The larger part of the body, outside the sun, represents incompleteness, problems, challenges, difficulties, failings—all that is wrong with the homeless person or student or local community. The sun (no matter how big or small) represents all that is perfect, funny, creative, accomplished, skillful—everything that is working in that person or community or organization. No matter how difficult one’s life, no matter how many problems a community has encountered, there remains a vibrant section of creative and positive energy. Someone who is addicted to heroin, who is homeless, who may even steal to get drugs, can be a gifted poet and storyteller. A homeless street-paper vendor may struggle with reading or emotional problems but can play soccer, grow to become part of a team, and travel around the world to play in the Homeless World Cup Tournament.12
Charity—or what I later describe as a problem orientation—focuses on the areas of a body that need fixing or ameliorating, whether it’s alcoholism or misplaced modifiers, lack of job skills or an inability to create acceptable academic discourse. The goal of charity or a problem orientation is to decrease the prevalence of a given problem. It often involves strategic initiatives and long-term plans.

Alternately, street papers—and many other community groups and teachers—employ what I could call a tactical orientation: They focus on creating projects that emphasize the part of the soul that is creative, competent, vibrant. Rather than making long-term efforts to fix problems, this approach seeks tactical uses of time and resources to celebrate, encourage, or develop those aspects of a body that are already working. This approach often takes the form not of long-term problem amelioration but limited-term projects. Vendors sell street papers at will, beginning and leaving as they choose. The stories covered in newspapers last a week, two weeks, a month. One project is incomplete in itself and must build on another. All of the projects at street papers are rooted in bettering the lives of those living in poverty. Some are silly or strange, such as the Homeless World Cup or Not Your Mama’s Bus Tour, and others are serious and practical, like a toner recycling business to employ street-paper vendors in Uruguay or the creation of a Global Street News Service. Projects are locally defined and action oriented. They arise from a familiarity with a situation and a desire for a creative response.

These projects provide limited direct benefits: usually informing readers or giving an individual a small income or an interesting experience. But tactical projects also operate in the realm of the indirect and the possible. Many things may happen in the course of doing projects. Someone may decide to kick heroin. A reader may change how he or she feels about the homeless man asleep on the corner. Someone may finally learn word processing or improve academic literacy skills. Certain problems may disappear or decrease, through the act of doing something else. But then again, they might not.

Projects by their tactical orientation are limited, and as a result the claims for them must be limited as well. When completed, projects accomplish only themselves—the printing and selling of a newspaper or magazine, the completion of a specific campaign, the publishing of a collection of writing, the staging of a soccer match. In the face of mounting global poverty and increasing gaps between rich and poor, such projects are rather insufficient. They immediately demand more projects, new ideas, continued innovations, and sustained campaigns. I find this tactical orientation both exciting and deeply humbling, one that is grounded in hope but in a critical manifestation of hope, one that is based in action and proceeds with eyes open.
As scholarship about the teaching of writing increasingly concerns itself with the streets and communities outside our classrooms and campuses, most of this writing continues to work from the inside out, describing what research, theory, and pedagogy from the university can tell us about working in the streets. In this book, I try to reverse the tide and describe some of the theory, teaching, and writing projects that have been working in the streets where I have lived and to connect that knowledge with the questions our field has been asking about its public commitments. Street papers are just one kind of organization that can provide valuable lessons to us if we reverse our camera lens; instead of looking, studying, and examining outside our schools and universities, we can let those with whom we work outside of campus reflect and speak to us.

Like most teachers I know, I contend regularly with questions of the ethics and efficacy of my work as a teacher and scholar. I have written this book not because I am an expert in community partnerships, but because I have realized that, with each year’s experience, new questions and complications arise when assessing the value of the work I do. By seeing my teaching and research as tactics of hope, I am able to seek new insights by reminding myself to acknowledge limitations while working to find more productive and innovative projects—primarily by asking and listening to those in the streets and in my classroom. By presenting my views and the insights of a range of community members with whom I have worked, I do not offer any final words; rather, I offer a range of ethical and practical questions to consider regarding the public turn in composition.

Notes

1. For those interested in the details of the urban legend, the Internet Movie Database summarizes it this way: “... the Candyman (Tony Todd) was once an ex-slave-turned-artist name Daniel Robitaille, who had an affair with his client’s daughter. Robitaille’s right hand was sawn off, he was covered in honey, and stung to death by bees. If anyone says the word ‘Candyman’ five times in a mirror, he’ll appear behind that person, a bloody hook as a replacement for his hand, and kill him. A series of unsolved murders is happening in the Cabrini Green projects and Helen is using this to help with her paper” (http://imdb.com/title/tt0103919/plotsummary).

2. See the next section for more on this term.

3. E.g., Reynolds; Porter et al.; McComiskey and Ryan; and Di Leo, Jacobs, and Lee. See also Chapter 1.

4. See Chapter 1 for an overview of strategies and tactics.
5. See Cushman and Emmons for outreach work focused on contact zones.

6. An area in Boston near Chinatown was formerly known as the “Combat Zone.” Decried by city officials for its “adult entertainment” and “illicit activities,” the neighborhood was eventually rezoned and gentrified. See http://www.ci.boston.ma.us/boston400/main.asp?ID=435.


8. Harkin, in (2002) has spoken about “excellence” as an empty signifier that dictates the game of higher education. Also see Readings; Aronowitz; Downing, Hurlbert, and Mathieu.

9. See, for example, commentary in Guardian’s music news at http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/news/story/0,11711,840380,00.html.

10. For more information on street papers, see http://www.streetpapers.com and http://www.nasna.org. From 2003 to 2005, I have served as the sole North American member of the INSP Executive Committee, a body elected by the delegates at annual conventions.

11. In many cities, street papers have faced legal battles to allow vendors to sell their papers on the streets. Issuing an official badge has become a necessity in many cities to make newspaper vending legal. Many vendors worldwide, however, continue to contend with police harassment.

12. The Homeless World Cup is a street-soccer tournament that began as a joking idea between two delegates at an INSP conference, debating whose paper’s vendors would win in a soccer tournament. Created by the International Network of Street Papers, this small idea has grown into a major annual event that was held for the first time in Graz, Austria, in the summer of 2003. Homeless men and women, many of whom have never played soccer or traveled internationally, represent their country in a tournament of 18 countries. Thus far, this strange little idea has brought many secondary benefits to the men and women who have participated. For more information, see http://www.streetoccer.org.

The power of tactical discourse, since it responds to strategic power without a stable spatial nexus, is temporary and fleeting. The effects of tactical discourse are not easily measurable in the short term and their overall effects are not always clear.

At times, C.’s group works with elders to claim the available strategic resources—funding proposals, vouchers for utility-debt relief. At other times, the group seeks to change the terms of strategic power through public, tactical campaigns.

To further explore public writing as tactical, I turn to a few stories from a writing group I ran at a Chicago street newspaper for two and a half years.

The **StreetWise Writers Group**

As I mention in the Introduction, street papers operate in urban centers worldwide with a goal of providing income and a public voice to people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Low-income or homeless people sell street papers in cities to the reading public; the papers typically include an editorial focus on homelessness and poverty-related issues. Since 1992, Chicago’s *StreetWise* has regularly published articles, columns, and poetry by the men and women who sell the paper as a means of income. When I became a volunteer copy editor there in 1997, any vendor wanting to write for the paper had to do so without support from the thinly stretched editorial staff. In my job as copy editor, I regularly typed and edited articles handwritten and turned in by vendors. If I couldn’t read the writing or if useful information was missing, questions remained unanswered unless the writer happened to stop in the editorial office. I edited stories using best guesses that often weren’t very good. Editorial changes were explained to writers only in chance encounters. Some writers were understandably angry or hurt because they felt their ideas had been changed. I suggested setting up a group for interested writers, one that would engage them in the entire writing process, where changes to the work would be made with them. The newspaper’s editor asked if I would run the group, and I agreed.

The weekly writing group began meeting on a snowy Monday night in March 1998, when, despite several new inches of snow and biting wind, five vendors showed up to work on story ideas. Early on, I found reporters from mainstream newspapers to work one-on-one with writers, and I held workshops on topics such as interviewing and reporting. Later, running the group alone, I introduced a workshop format: At each meeting we circulated copies of participants’ writing to discuss, write together, and read our writing aloud. Over the next few
years, the day, time, and focus of the group changed based on the writers’ desires and interests. What became tradition throughout was the weekly meeting itself, the desire to find a public audience, and having lunch together. Eating before the meeting began was an important way to form community—and to be sure that no one was writing on an empty stomach.

The writers were a diverse group in terms of age, race, gender, sexual preference, religion, and life experiences. To describe the writers as “homeless” is to invoke certain stereotypes that were not always accurate. While the organization’s mission was to serve people “who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless,” there were no specific rules about who could sell the newspaper. Anyone who decided that he or she was “at risk of becoming homeless” could become a vendor. This meant that many financially vulnerable people, housed and unhoused, chose to sell the paper. And as word about the writing group spread, a few people signed up to sell the newspaper in order to join the writing group. Homelessness was not, however, a meaningless concept in the group; many of the writers lacked stable housing. Some camped in parks, stayed in shelters, slept on trains, or rented substandard facilities. Most struggled with additional material difficulties that constrained their possibilities for making a better life; defaulted student loans kept at least three writers from fulfilling their dreams of completing college degrees. Debt troubles and inaccessibility to legal representation kept others working in informal economies (like the street paper), which promised no job advancement, health coverage, or retirement benefits. Records of felony convictions rendered at least one articulate and hard-working writer unemployable, despite job programs for ex-offenders. A series of petty arrests and jail time caused other writers to miss out on job opportunities. Disabling conditions, such as blindness, mental illness, or substance addiction caused added difficulties for several writers, especially since adequate services were typically not available. Poor health conditions—ranging from HIV to hepatitis to easily treatable conditions like near-sightedness—coupled with lack of access to health care, dental treatment, or eye exams, diminished the quality of life for virtually every writer in the group. For one aspiring writer, an untreated kidney ailment resulted in death—one week before his appointment at a free clinic and months shy of his 49th birthday.

Writing in this group therefore amounted to an important but insufficient response to these sobering realities. Our weekly workshops did not offer any credentials or college credit. Letters of appeal did not unburden writers from student-loan debt. Articulate letters and recommendations did not allay prospective employers’ fears about a felony past. Letters to health agencies freed up some eye exams and
glasses, but there was never enough medical care when it was needed. The writers and I often discovered that our acts of writing were unable to bring about or transact anything definite. In addition, writers had to negotiate their desire to attend the writing-group meetings with often more pressing demands of earning money and negotiating the Byzantine network of state and social service institutions.

Public writing in our group began (or gained energy) at the point where transactional writing failed. When individual efforts at finding employment, housing, or another form of justice proved unsuccessful, writers turned to public writing out of frustration or a desire for social change. Early on in the writing group, these efforts took the form of individual articles testifying about events that writers either experienced or witnessed, such as “The Red Line is a Tough Place to Sleep,” an article that conveys a sense of homelessness as a difficult cycle to escape. Felix wrote this piece after leaving our meeting on a rainy night; he was unable to sell enough newspapers to rent a room, and had to spend the night sleeping on a Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) el train.

The Red Line Is a Tough Place to Sleep

Felix Meek

It’s fun spending the night on the train going to Disney World, but I want to talk about what it’s like to spend a night on a CTA train for a homeless person . . . .

I normally sleep on the red-line train. That means staying alert while sleeping . . . . Around 4 A.M . . . . conductors leave the doors open a long time at each stop, letting all the cold air rush in.

While sleeping, many people are unaware they are being stalked by train robbers. These thieves sit back and wait on you to fall asleep. They surround the sleeping rider, front, back and on the side. First they touch him (or her) and ask him questions, hoping they are sound asleep. That’s when they use razor blades to cut a sleeper’s coat or pants pocket and steal their money or just reach over them and steal their purse or bag that might contain anything of value. Then they get off at the next stop. And when the rider wakes up, his personal belongings are gone and the other passengers just look as though they haven’t seen anything . . . .

What a way to sleep . . . .

After a night on the train, my body feels tired but . . . . I start my life as a homeless StreetWise salesman all over again. That’s when bad health can come in—in six years I’ve caught pneumonia twice, colds, headaches, body aches and depression, which sometimes makes me doubt my reasons for living.

So, where does preparing for a job or going to a job interview fit in? Who . . . . would hire someone who . . . . spent the night on the red line? (Epstein and Mathieu 2000, 12)
Through this article, Felix sought to inform the public about a situation he could not ameliorate despite his best efforts. The writer had no direct goal, just a desire to testify about his life, in hopes that readers might see him and other people on the streets a bit differently.

Another member of the writing group, Robert, planned a book entitled *The World as I See It* that he hoped would help the public see *themselves* differently. As someone who often felt invisible on the streets, he felt he had a unique view of human behavior. Robert never finished the book but published several articles on the topic, including this one.

**A Day of Selling StreetWise**

*Robert Dillard*

Sunday: I was out selling papers on Diversey and Clark. The time was about 5:00 when this gentleman walked up to me and asked, “What are you selling?” I said, “Streetwise.” Then he said, “I can’t stand that paper, or you. Why don’t you go somewhere else? The world would be better if people like you weren’t out here everyday.”

He was a white guy, about as tall as me (about six feet), wearing a T-shirt, gym shoes (it was kinda cold but he had on a T-shirt). Talked like he had a real nice education—he wasn’t no bum.

I didn’t respond. I kept saying to myself, I’m not going to let this guy make me mad. I just let him keep doing his thing. Then he said, “It’s a stupid paper, it takes a stupid person to stand out in any kind of weather trying to sell a stupid paper like this. Don’t you have anything better to do?”

I responded, “Yes, instead of me standing out here selling my paper, I could be at home writing my book. And by the way, if you don’t mind, sir, I’d like to put you in my book. The name of my book is *The World as I See It*. May I have your name please.”

He said, “No way.”

I said, “I’ll just call you Mr. John Doe. But I will put you in the book, because of the way you talk to me. And you kind of opened my eyes about what I want to say about the world as I see it.”

He said he didn’t care and he walked off. I told him, “Have a good day and God go with you.” (Epstein and Mathieu 2000, 17)

This article and many others were circulated in several public forums—in the newspaper, through other local arts publications, and in public readings. “Vendor Voices” was a two-page section inside the paper set aside for vendors’ writing. Once the writing group became established in the organization, we gained some editorial control of those pages. Discussions about publication choices became central in the group.
Pleasures and Perils of Streetwise Publishing

The public aspect of the writing group gave many members a small but important outlet to voice anger, discontent, joys, and triumphs. Publishing was a de facto privilege for the group and the reason most of the writers came to meetings, yet members spent much time discussing the advantages of publishing along with its limits and burdens. While most writers hoped for a wide audience, they expressed hesitations about going public. Some fears related to being read; others concerned not being read.

One writer feared that once his writing entered a public realm, he would lose control over the text and how it might be read and misread by audiences. Some writers worried that publishing controversial views might make them vulnerable to public attacks in whatever form. One member explained that writing was integral and necessary to his life, but that being read by a wide public was unexpected and made him nervous. Stella Fitzpatrick (1995), a facilitator of adult basic-education publishing groups in England, writes that feelings of attraction and apprehension are inherent to publishing, especially when the writers are in vulnerable economic or social situations. Writing and publishing, she asserts, is a constant negotiation between safety and risk, and she characterizes the experience as simultaneously “liberating and alarming,” “a mixture of apprehension and pleasure” (11).

Writers frequently raised questions about the group’s public identity and rhetorical persuasiveness. For writers who struggled between social invisibility and being seen in stereotypical ways, claiming a public space in print meant claiming a right to respond to issues and discourses affecting their lives, yet this public access came only as part of a homeless writing group. For many in the group, to claim an identity as a published, homeless writer was a conflicted one, to say the least. This issue emerged keenly when the writers began to find outlets for their writing beyond the newspaper and received attention in local media. While planning a public reading and press conference for the publication of the group’s writing in the *Journal of Ordinary Thought*, one writer said that he did not want to appear on camera because the news station to be present was carried by cable outlets in his family’s hometown. He said, “I don’t want them to know I sell this paper.” The issue of affiliation also arose as we planned to release an anthology of the group’s writing. Several members said they did not want the name of the newspaper to appear on the book’s cover or if it did they requested the print to be small. They worried that potential readers might be turned off by the “homeless angle” and would not want to buy it.
Sometimes the risks of publishing extended beyond issues of identity to concerns about personal safety. One founding member of the group was in Chicago after fleeing an abusive husband in another state years earlier, so she had to make decisions about whether to publish using her real name or a pseudonym and whether to include photos, weighing the desire to be recognized for her work with her concerns that a copy of the publication might reveal her location. We used group time to discuss these difficult issues, especially near times of publication, public performances, and media interest. Some members chose to publish under pseudonyms, while others requested their photos not be taken. Others, however, strongly argued for the right to have their names and pictures used. This was a right, as they saw it, to claim a public identity as a writer—not a passive person, not a “bum,” but someone possessing creativity and intellect.

Despite legitimate fears about being read in a public forum, writers additionally worried about not being heard at all. Was anyone changed or persuaded by what they read? We knew that roughly 25,000 people purchased the paper each week. According to street-paper readership surveys, readers listed writing by vendors as one of their favorite features of the paper. Yet, it was unclear exactly how readers were responding to this work or what conclusions they were drawing. Members wanted to get feedback directly, which is difficult when writing in print, especially a small newspaper.

The paper occasionally received letters to the editor in response to articles the writers’ group had written. When writers sold papers on the streets they would get feedback from regular customers about their articles, mostly unqualified praise and requests for signed copies of the paper. While such responses were valuable motivations for the writers, they came sporadically and offered little information about the effects of the writing on readers. It was unclear whether the writing influenced how the readers perceived local issues and homeless people, or if they merely enjoyed and supported the fact that someone they saw as marginalized had chosen to write at all. One fear was that readers had overdetermined charitable responses to writing in the paper, in that it was read but appreciated in a paternalistic vein. The rhetorical challenge of the writing group—and of all street newspapers—was to offer writing that subverted tired stereotypes of homeless people without becoming a voyeuristic spectacle of individual struggles, pains, or triumphs.

One way we negotiated this rhetorical challenge of representing individual homeless experiences was to develop projects in which the writing group would collaborate. The first occasion of this group activity resulted from the trial of Gregory Becker, an off-duty Chicago police officer who shot to death Joseph Gould, an unarmed *StreetWise* vendor. The group devoted seven weeks of the Vendor Voices pages to Becker’s
re-sentencing trial, writing in various genres and involving the reading public in an appeal to the judge, to which more than a hundred people and groups responded and publicly added their names. In the end, Becker received a shorter prison sentence than we had hoped but one more severe than we had feared. While it was impossible to know if and in what ways the outcome was affected by the letters sent to the judge and the public campaign, the writers felt it was important to speak out publicly together.

A desire for an audience and collaboration led members of the writing group to become interested in publicly performing their writing. This started with a few college and high-school class visits to the newspaper offices, for which the writing group planned readings. Later, through our group’s affiliation with Chicago’s Neighborhood Writing Alliance, the members had occasions to read their work in public forums like public libraries, the Chicago Cultural Center, and the Guild Poetry Complex. The performance aspect of the writing appealed to those writers who felt that the effects of print articles were too unclear or ambiguous. The desire for public interaction and dialogue helped spur interest in a full-length performance piece. Not Your Mama’s Bus Tour was our most ambitious and outrageous public project. It was a theatrical bus tour of Chicago, narrated by members of the writing group, who told stories about their lives and their experiences in the city, in the spaces where they occurred.8

**Not Your Mama’s Bus Tour**

Creating a theatrical tour of Chicago guided by homeless writers, for which we expected the public to pay $25, was a strange and silly idea in many ways. The possibilities for failure were many. The group had never attempted a project for which specific writers had to be present. At our public readings, interested writers just turned up, and we always had sufficient numbers. In this tour, we would have a specific cast with ongoing performance demands. No one was sure if we could—or would want to—accomplish them. Despite the risks, this seemed like an important public project for several reasons: (1) It was a concrete way to link the writers’ stories with Chicago’s city space in a format that would allow a powerful face-to-face interaction with a live audience. Unlike writing an article for a newspaper that people might or might not read, imagining an audience for the play was clearer for writers, because this audience would be physically present. (2) The bus tour could provide the writers with a public platform for raising political and social issues that affected their lives yet were beyond their individual control. Around that time, the group was especially concerned
about citywide gentrification and Chicago’s push toward a tourist economy, and how these priorities led to service cuts and decreased housing availability for low-income areas of the city. The bus tour was designed to co-opt (and parody) the city’s tourist aims and provide a serious, yet humorous, counter-discourse to it. (3) Since we imagined a paying public for the tour, we planned to pay the writers/actors for their rehearsal and performance time. In this way, the writers would not have as many material constraints when choosing to work on this project. (4) This project would require the writers to hone a wide range of skills—writing for a public audience, proficiency with computers (to write and edit scripts), the ability to commit to a project and arrive on time, public speaking and performance skills, and the ability to collaborate on an ambitious project.

The tour came together quickly. With the help of a Dutch theater director and Chicago’s Neighborhood Writing Alliance, our group planned to put a storytelling bus on the road within six weeks, to prove to ourselves that we could do it and to see if the public liked the idea. During the first three weeks, the writers scripted possible scenes, working from prompts I prepared. In the next three weeks we worked with a giant map of the city to determine which scenes were artistically and geographically possible, mapped a course, rehearsed scenes, raised money, found a bus, publicized the project, talked with reporters, and sold tickets. Our cast of a dozen homeless or formerly homeless writers-turned-actors kept to a rigorous rehearsal schedule. The writers negotiated a group agreement with the organization for payment for their writing and rehearsal and performance time.

The process was hectic and energizing. None of us was really sure that we could actually pull the project together. There were so many potentially crippling problems—actors not showing up, poor weather, lack of public performance permits, not to mention the possibility that the public would not respond well, or at all, to the event. We jokingly posted on the wall our ten biggest fears, naming and laughing at them as a way to take away their power. Days were spent editing and rehearsing scenes, while nights were spent driving through the city, planning the route, and timing distances from place to place.

On a warm and clear night in August 2000, a yellow school bus filled with press, friends, and supporters paused momentarily before driving northbound on Michigan Avenue toward Grant Park, the scene of the 1968 Democratic Convention riots, and the location of the first scene of Not Your Mama’s Bus Tour. Curly, one of the two tour guides, announced the following to the 44 passengers on the bus:

Ladies and gentleman, I’d like to welcome you aboard tonight and go over a few rules. According to the National Transportation Safety Board, we are required to tell you that:
This is not a Gray Line, Blue Line, or Happy Face Tour.

At 7:07 we will not strain our necks at Navy Pier to look at some McFerris Wheel and pay $14.95 for a sandwich named after a city 767 miles away.

At 7:18 we will not entomb ourselves in a stomach-turning elevator climbing to the 104th floor of the Sears Catalogue.

At 7:29, we will not pass Go or City Hall, where Richard sits only because his father sat all over this city.

At 7:38 we will not even discuss corporatized cows or public ping-pong.

At 7:57, we will not contemplate John Hancock in any form. The name alone indicates just how obscene it is.

And finally at no time during this tour will we stop at any McDonalds, let alone some Rock ‘n Roll McDonalds, for a way-too-boring double-cheeseburger combo super-sized, as if there isn’t already enough wiener envy in this city.

This is Not Your Mama’s Bus Tour, but depending on your mama, this may be her kind of ride. Welcome aboard.

This introduction set the tone of the performance as both play and critique. Through humor and word play, Curly’s introduction made it clear that this tour would show a different kind of Chicago to audience members, yet it would not be one lacking humor or pleasure.

Over the next two hours, the bus made six stops around Chicago: Grant Park, scene of the 1968 Democratic Convention riots; Maxwell Street, the birthplace of Chicago blues and a historic immigrant gateway and marketplace, now all but demolished due to the expansion of the University of Illinois at Chicago; a Gold Coast apartment building, where one writer had once been taken in by friends; the street corner where Gregory Becker shot Joseph Gould; Orchestra Hall, where one of the writers had performed at age 17 in an Irish dance troupe; and Malcolm X College. While the bus drove from place to place, the passengers heard stories told by two tour guides, as well as poetry, songs, and music. At each location, the passengers got off the bus and watched a scene based on a story from a writer’s life.

Anaya, who was struggling with student-loan debt, performed her scene in front of Malcolm X College, one of several Chicago city colleges. Because she was nervous about the public exposure this event might bring, she was reluctant to disclose too much information about herself. We worked together to create a scene in which she could share certain information with the audience without feeling too exposed. We struck upon the form of a game, creating cards listing several topics about her life—some were areas she was willing to discuss and others were not. As the crowd exited the bus just at sunset, Anaya stood in a paved open courtyard, as a huge sign reading “Malcolm X College” was
lit high above her head in the background. She smiled a radiant smile, sporting long braids and a bright purple jacket. Once everyone was gathered closely around her, she spoke:

Hello everyone and welcome. You can call me Anaya. Anaya only. I am homeless. There are many stories I could tell you about my life and some things I don’t want to talk about. So let’s play a little game. To do so, I need two assistants. (She then chose two audience members.) On these cards are subjects related to my life—Family, God, Age, Childhood, Malcolm X College, Sex, Exercise, Drugs, Relationships, Recovery House, and Mental Health. If you choose a topic I am willing to talk about, this is the sound you’ll hear. (To the first volunteer, she says) Please give us a sound! (Person makes a sound.) Thank you, let’s give her a big hand. And if you’ve chosen a topic I am NOT willing to talk about, this is the sound you’ll hear. (To the second volunteer she says) Please give us a different sound. (Other person makes a sound.) And two more rules: no pictures and no questions. Let’s play.

When someone selected the card “Malcolm X College,” the audience heard the following:

I am standing just twenty steps from the door of Malcolm X College. But it might as well be 20 miles. Six thousand dollars in student-loan debt separates me from Malcolm X or any other college. How long would it take you to pay off this debt? For some people it might be two years, a year, two months, two weeks, or even one day. For me, it’s been five years, and I still haven’t made a dent. I have worked homeless and gone to school homeless. How can a girl who loves education and longs to go to college make her way when the earth trembles and the ground beneath her begins to shake?

Anaya’s scene was interspersed with both polemical and utopian fragments, including singing, poetry, and monologue sharing personal information like the fact that she had never used drugs, was mentally healthy, wanted to wait until marriage for sex, and was a devout Christian.

At the end of the scene, she explained the game to the audience by saying, “I used to say yes to any request, providing any information, regardless of whether I wanted to or not. But now, I can say no. I am not my experiences, I am not my debt, and I am not my past. You can call me Anaya.”

In this scene, Anaya was able to speak about the role debt was playing in her life, to educate the audience, without feeling a sense of shame or apologizing. For those few minutes, she literally controlled the game, and she reveled in the moments when audience members chose cards, such as “Age” or “Family,” and she held up her laminated
sign, “I don’t want to talk about it.” And in the moments she did share, she gained a sense of confidence that evolved over the length of the performances. Her previous reluctance to speak gave way to memorable performances, where she played with the audience while allowing them to assemble a partial tapestry of her life. Her game subtly played with the public’s voyeuristic interest in the poor. The audience had to ask questions, and Anaya was in the role of saying yes or no, controlling the audience’s desire for information.

This was just one example of the element of parody in the performance. The writers and I had agreed that the audience should not find the tour lacking in humor or artistic pleasure. Many scenes had nothing to do with homelessness at all, because the writers wanted the audience to see that being homeless was just one aspect of their lives; it didn’t explain who they were or encompass their identities. Thus music, both recorded and live, dancing, poetry, and humor were all elements of the tour.

Later in the tour, the bus wound its way through Chicago’s medical district, described by Curly as “the largest concentration of hospitals in the city, which ironically sits just east of the neighborhood in the city where the fewest residents have health insurance.” He dryly added, “Well, at least they have a nice view of the hospitals.” He went on to describe the procedure for seeing a dentist at the county hospital (for those lacking health insurance), which he described as “the only place in the world where people run to, and not away from, the dentist.” The “Toothless Olympics,” as Curly called it, was a process that begins with a qualifying phone call at 7 A.M. one day. The next day everyone lucky enough to get through on the phone waits outside a locked door, and when it opens they race down a series of hospital hallways to try to beat out the “69 other tooth-achin’ qualifiers” to arrive at a desk, get a number, and wait several hours on “a hard-ass bench” to see a dentist—to have the tooth pulled. “That’s right,” the guide told the audience in an authoritative and reassuring tone. “The only dental care available at County is getting a bad tooth pulled. No fixings, no fillings, just pulled. So, remember everyone, don’t forget to brush!” At that point, the masochistic song “Dentist” from Little Shop of Horrors boomed through the bus, while a cast member cheerfully passed out toothbrushes to passengers.

Through moments like these, the writers shared a view of the city and its bureaucratic procedures for dealing with poor people that most audience members had never seen, yet did so in a playful rather than heavy-handed way. And since the audience and actors were physically present together—in an un-air-conditioned school bus in August—this allowed for dialogue between writers and audience. One of the tour guides, for example, always asked whether anyone in the audience
had ever been inside Cook County Hospital. During the dress rehearsal, when the casts’ family and friends were aboard, many affirmative hands went in the air. Once the paid performances began, no hand ever went up. The tour gave audience members a glimpse into life at the county hospital. And by handing everyone a toothbrush, the guide suggested that they too might find themselves on a “hard-ass bench” someday, waiting for a free tooth pulling.

For its final scene, the bus stopped in front of Chicago’s Orchestra Hall, where Maggie would be selling newspapers, awaiting our arrival. She refused to ride with the other actors in a car just in front of the bus, assuring us that she would be waiting at the scene when we arrived. Every night the tour guides and I would sweat out the moments before the bus pulled up to the spot, fearing she might not be there. Gee, Curly’s co-guide, would even tell audiences, “Maybe we’ll see Maggie; sometimes she’s out here selling newspapers,” just in case she wasn’t there. Then there would be a pause as Gee looked for her, a pause that seemed to me to last forever, though in reality it was never more than a moment or two. “There she is,” he ended up saying every night. The audience filed out and gathered around Maggie, as she stood on a busy sidewalk downtown on Michigan Avenue. My laptop and portable speakers were quickly rushed out to provide musical accompaniment. Radiant at sixty, with colorful headscarves and several shirts and skirts, Maggie commanded attention. With a portable microphone, the guide introduced her and asked her why this location was special. Every night her explanation differed somewhat, but it always included her memory of dancing onstage at Orchestra Hall as part of an Irish Dance troupe when she was 17. She usually said, “We did a four-handed reel that night, but since I am alone here tonight, I’ll dance a jig for you all.” At that, my computer started an mp3 file of “Irish Washer Woman,” and Maggie danced a jig with the lightness and brio of a teenager. Through her words and dance, Maggie transformed from a self-described “bag lady” to a joyful presence that captivated the crowd each night. People far beyond our paying audience stood around to watch and listen, so she regularly danced for hundreds. My hope was that her performance—as well as the rest of the tour—communicated to the audience that much history, talent, and beauty reside in the people that one might see homeless on the streets.

Our group staged six two-hour tours over the course of three weeks. Local media covered the event, including local TV news coverage, print stories in seven newspapers including the *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago’s largest daily paper), top coverage on a local theater website, performances recorded by two documentary filmmakers, and reports by two radio stations, including a 20-minute interview and news piece on the local NPR affiliate. The reviews were all positive. One reporter
called the project a mixture of “Chicago history, street theater and candor” (Rumpf 2000). Another described it as bringing “an unconventional history lesson to life through street theater. At times, it is also a poetry slam, a jam session, and a sing along” (Vogell 2000). The headline from the theater website said, “This bus’ll school ya...” (Buccola 2000). All the shows sold out, and the public responded warmly to the tour and to the actors. Audiences lingered after the performances, asking questions of the cast, and getting autographs. People called and emailed words of gratitude and praise. Of the twelve cast members, none missed a performance and almost no one missed a rehearsal, an unprecedented reality in the two-and-a-half-year history of our group.

Tactical discourse was the realm of the StreetWise Writers Group. Unable to equal or overturn the powerful strategic systems scripting their lives, the group created projects in various polemic and utopian forms—calculated pot shots, poetry, humor, critique and parody—as tactical responses to the systems framing their lives. Not Your Mama’s Bus Tour parodied the present strategic power of the city and offered glimpses of possible other realities. During the weeks of rehearsals and performances, all the group members were committed to—and pushed each other toward—the impossibly funny and strange idea of a traveling theatrical bus tour narrated by singing, dancing, and speaking homeless people. The project temporarily rewrote the strategic mandates affecting the writers’ lives. Twenty people of different ages, races, and economic groups worked together toward one vision of a yellow school bus. The writers negotiated their own work conditions. They were paid a living wage to share their wisdom and perform life stories, taking people to the actual city spaces where they occurred. More than 150 members of the paying public heard stories about living with debt, police brutality, discovering sexuality, and finding hope. Twelve homeless writers/actors received pleasure, good experiences, and a job for six weeks. They honed their writing skills in creative and engaging ways to directly and immediately address a public audience. And indirectly, the writers responded to the powerful records and institutions framing their lives. At its best, perhaps this fleeting experience allowed the writers and producers a glimpse of a different life, where work is a meaningful act of creation. Perhaps it gave everyone involved a bit of hope, to keep struggling and keep risking.

The tour attempted to upset conventional expectations about Chicago, bus tours, and homeless people. Unable to directly change the city spaces denied to the poor, the cast literally co-opted the city for two hours a night and turned it into an impromptu performance space.

Lacking the stable nexus from which to continue the bus tour in the long term, the project’s power was tactical—short-term, with a beginning and ending point. There was friction within the nonprofit
about how quickly the project came together and the writers’ right to negotiate their own work terms. The organization’s director threatened repeatedly to cancel the show and, in the end, only reluctantly let it go forward. During the first scene of our last performance, police arrived and threatened to tow the bus away for not having secured permits to allow people to gather. An attorney advised us that if the tour were to continue, we could be sued for playing music without paying royalty fees. The tactical possibilities of this wonderful project eventually began giving way to the strategic realities of laws, permits, and organizational dissent.

The end of this project also marked the end of my three-plus years at that organization. Our writing group continued in a similar form after I left, and a revised version of the tour has continued for several summers. After the performances, however, even the most well-intentioned audience members returned to their comfortable homes, while Anaya still faced her debts; a tooth that could be filled today is still pulled at Cook County Hospital. As a tactical project, this tour created flurries of press and moments of energy. But as de Certeau suggests, the effects of tactics are not clear or permanent. They must operate within temporal restrictions. Structural realities do not readily disappear.

Yet, despite the fact that this project did not have a clear outcome, it was still a meaningful act of creation. One performer described the time of the play as one of the happiest moments of her life. Another said, “This is real. In a world that is increasingly unreal or virtual, that's important.” Another said, “It’s art, and that’s why it’s important.” After nearly three years working with the StreetWise Writers Group, I began to understand the hopeful aspect inherent in tactical writing. The writing of the group, especially in this project, was never a means for something else—a better job, a grade, a more just world. While many of the writers wanted to change their lives, get a better job, or change the world, all were aware of the slim likelihood that our articles or projects could accomplish that. Certainly, the writing always had an eye on someplace else: on a better future. Underneath it all was hope, a hope that maybe enough writing, publishing, and bus tours might change the world. Hope stirred the projects and prompted discussions and writing, but the work was an end in itself. In this group, public writing was a meaningful act of community. Writing was never a transactional means to something else. The pleasures of the collaborations, shared meals, discussions, and quiet moments of writing were enough, for that week. But how the group’s writing changed any readers or the writers is unknown and even unknowable.
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