

# Literacy and Civic Engagement

## **Civil Rights Symposium: An Interdepartmental and Interdisciplinary Conversation on Civil Rights Reform**

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Good morning. I am pleased to be a part of this symposium and able to participate in critical conversations about issues and challenges related to civil rights, especially—as I must say—in the face of the ongoing obscenities that are occurring in Jena, Louisiana, with the six children who are being victimized there, or in the face of the persistent injustices in urban settings, as symbolized on September 18th by the 13-year old boy in inner city Washington, D.C. who was shot in the head by an “off-duty” policeman who suspected that the boy of stealing a dirt bike. The boy died at the scene. The policeman thought he had committed a crime. He was not tried and convicted of having done so, but even if he had been tried and convicted, what we have now is a child, who might have

stolen a dirt bike, who is dead by the hands of police who thought that he was a relatively small time thief. Question: Do we live in a nation where we kill our children for stealing bicycles? These are just three examples from an endless list. Obviously, our work in the securing of civil rights for all is far from done.

For the moment at hand, then, I am particularly grateful, both personally and ideologically, to Professor Kells, her colleagues, and the University of New Mexico for providing thoughtful leadership in understanding the necessity of critical conversation about basic American values and providing also a substantive occasion in which reflection and deliberation can meaningfully occur. So, again, I am delighted to be here.

I've chosen today the topic **Literacy and Civic Engagement**. Let me begin by posing three basic assertions that will constitute the general framework within which I hope that all of us will engage this morning:

1. Literacy is an instrument of power.
2. A primary use of **power** is to fulfill needs and desires.
3. Among the most persistent desires that human beings have exhibited across human history are desires for: **freedom, justice, and the capacity to function with agency and authority within an accommodating environment**—which we often articulate as the capacity to have securely in one's life food, clothing, shelter, and meaningful work, with a sense of community and a sense of prosperity.

I draw your attention to these three basic assertions to underscore how inextricably language, literacy, and rhetorical action are connected to our capacity to carry out meaningful lives. So, I ask you to hold this very basic

framework in mind as I try to unpack some of the extraordinarily complex and intricate relationships that I see to constitute what on the surface is simple and basic but in the execution is, again, extraordinarily complex—if the history of a human presence in the world and particularly the history of the United States as a nation is any evidence.

In my view, a good place to begin a systematic interrogation of ideas is to clarify the terms of engagement. I remind you that the terms that I've chosen for today are: **literacy**, **civic**, and indeed **engagement**. So, what is the conceptual landscape on which these terms operate? More importantly, perhaps, given the socio-cultural context in which we find ourselves in 2007, how do such terms come together as useful tools for thinking critically about human endeavor generally and the distinctive missions of our colleges and universities in particular—namely, teaching, research, and service? How do critical conversations about literacy and civic engagement help to enrich our understanding of the human enterprise both synchronically and diachronically, especially with regard to changes in our operational patterns—whether subtle or not so subtle—over time? How do we track convergencies between literacy and civic engagement and recognize not just the trajectories of various social reforms within such convergencies but indeed the ongoing need for reformation as we commit to the waging of peace, rather than war, in a highly diverse global context?

So, let's start with **literacy**. In my view literacy is an amazingly complex concept that I've been thinking rather persistently about for several decades now. My favorite definition comes from Sojourner Truth, whom in actuality history has

categorized as an illiterate person. In 1867, in an informal response to a literacy requirement for the right to vote, Truth said: “You know, children, I don’t read such small stuff as letters, I read men and nations” (Loewenberg and Bogin 1976: 239). I found Truth’s statement to be truly provocative and compelling. It led me to consider literacy, not in terms of the ability to encode and decode texts, but in more concrete, on-the-ground terms of what it really means to be literate and to use literacy. This approach permitted me to understand in a different way that literacy is indeed a social, political, cultural act that is totally contextualized within the environments of its performance and thereby quite viscerally embedded in the lives of human beings who live and work in the company of others with consequence. From this springboard, I began fleshing out what might be termed various enactments of literacy, and ultimately I came to a working definition that has sustained my own ideological sensibilities for quite some time. I define literacy as the ability:

- To gain access to information.
- To manage and process that information variously (e.g., to assemble, sort, analyze, synthesize, categorize, evaluate, and make sense of it).
- To use information management tools (e.g., digital media) and other resources variously:
  - In communicating with others in speech, writing, and other media;
  - In understanding, articulating, and solving all sorts of problems from all sorts of perspectives.
- To function expertly as a thinker, learner, communicator within and across various discourse communities in:

- Producing, creating, or generating knowledge,
- Expressing insight,
- Conveying understanding,
- Forming and maintaining “social” relationships, and
- Getting things done.

In my view, this multi-layered definition brings to bolder relief how much more literacy is than just reading little letters on a page. I dare say, as Paulo Friere and Donald Macedo (1987) suggest, that literacy is a process of making meaning with language and using the multiple integrative processes associated with it to “read the word and the world.” Again, this perspective leads me to focus, not so much on literacy as a set of skills and abilities, but on rhetorical action as a demonstration of will in asserting a right to agency and authority in the negotiations of our lives using language and literacy as vital and flexible tools.

Such a perspective of the roles that literacy plays in rhetorical action brings us to the ultimate questions that meaningfully link literacy to the other two terms: What is our world? What is the nature, scope, and scale of our engagements in it?

With these two terms, I’d like to go into default mode—mainly because of time constraints. After all, a keynote address isn’t intended to be a day-long treatise. It’s meant to be a starter, a tone setter that takes a whole lot less leisure than we ultimately have to do justice to these critical topics. So, I’ve chosen dictionary definitions, but the dictionary that I think is a good place to begin is ***The Oxford English Dictionary***, which thankfully is now on line, so I invite you to check it out, if you haven’t already done so, as a valuable resource.

According to the *OED*, **civic** borrowed from Latin. The first recorded use of it was in 1542 in the phrase **civic crown**. This phrase referenced a coronet, garland, or wreath that symbolized a prestigious distinction bestowed on a person who saved the life of a fellow-citizen in war. A dominant use of the term over time, however, is that it means “belonging to citizens,” “pertaining or proper to citizens,” “pertaining to a city, borough, or municipality,” “pertaining to citizenship,” and most recently (1942) in another phrase **civic-mindedness**, which the *OED* defines as “inclined to concern oneself with civic affairs; public-spirited.”

The two points that I’d like to emphasize with this set of definitions are, first, that the word **civic** is anchored in the actions of people in specific localities, and second that in both its original meaning and its most recent meanings this word is linked to service—the saving of the life of a fellow-citizen in war and now the dedicating oneself to the service of cities, i.e., to the service of a human collective, or people who form a community.

So, while I go to the third term, **engagement**, hold in mind two thoughts:

- One, the making of meaning through the use of language in the complex process of reading the world.
- Two, anchoring our actions as citizens in the service of the communities to which we “belong.”

Now, with the word **engagement**, I’d like to go straight to one dimension of the concept that we seem to have stopped consciously noting at all and to another where we seem to be focusing increasingly on qualities of action rather than qualities of condition. The *OED* notes that in 1624, **engagement**

referenced “a formal promise, agreement, undertaking, covenant,” and it continues to this day to mean “a promise,” “a moral or legal obligation; a tie of duty or gratitude.” In other words, I believe that we don’t typically pay enough attention to the concept of **engagement** as a noun, a condition invoking a moral or legal obligation tied to a particular duty—whether the context of the duty is a marriage or a job or an appointment, or any number of other social relationships anchored by a covenant, including our covenant as citizens of the nation and our world.

The second dimension that I’d like to pull into this mix, however, is the use of **engagement** from 1642 to mean “being entangled; involved or [in an] entangled condition” or from 1881 to mean “the action of crossing swords,” the type of connotation that people in our modern era might associate with Jean Luc Picard and his *Star Trek* command: “Engage,” or the idea of “puttin’ the pedal to the medal.”

So now, we have a triangulation of concepts:

- One, making meaning through the use of language and literacy in the complex process of deliberately, consciously, and critically reading our world(s).
- Two, anchoring our actions as citizens, individually and collectively, in our well-read world(s) in the service of the well-being of the ever-broadening circles of the communities to which we “belong,” and
- Three, metaphorically “crossing swords,” or vigilantly engaging with needs, issues, problems, circumstances, or “putting the pedal to the medal,” as it were, in order to meet both the moral and legal obligations of

civic duty, i. e, recognizing our commitment to honor the covenants that we make—automatically—in being human as we make and manage meaningful lives for ourselves in the company of others on a small blue planet.

This triangulation is the framework in which I stand for this symposium as I think about civil rights, the ongoing struggle for justice and equality, the ongoing need for social reform, and the vital roles that rhetorical action continues to play, not only in socio-political participation as a specific function of citizenship, but also with regard to the vigilance we must all sustain in building and maintaining a nation that boldly professes a dedication to truth, freedom, justice, and equality for all, regardless of race, gender, creed, color, language, age, or national origin.

Given such point of view, how does this symposium offer the opportunity for positive impact and action? What obligations are thereby ascribed to colleges and universities, whether public or private, as institutions within the United States of America that serve our social order in the training of our children for citizenship and thereby in the upholding of core American values? How do we turn knowledge into meaningful action so that our basic human tool—language—has a greater capacity to function as a substantive tool in our common collaborative quest for a democratic society with a small “d”—i.e., a society shaped by the agency and authority of its people—locally, nationally, and indeed globally? Perhaps more essentially, within a nation in which we proclaim democracy with a big “D,” how do we as human beings function on a daily basis as ethical, socially responsible, upstanding citizens?

The simple answer, of course, to questions related to the roles of colleges and universities is quite straightforward. Our duty is to teach, to engage in well-grounded research, and to connect our knowledge-making enterprises in service to the communities that surround us. As instruments of society, of a democratic society, our mandates are:

- To help our students interrogate and understand the values on which our society is based: truth, freedom, justice, and equality for all.
- To document the lives of both extra-ordinary and ordinary people, regardless of race, gender, creed, color, language, or national origin, in building and sustaining our nation.
- To forge theoretical frameworks that permit our society at large to interpret actions, patterns of action, as well as the truths and consequences of both action and inaction in light of our proclaimed principles and values.
- To help our students:
  - to think consciously, critically, and creatively about our multi-layered national narratives;
  - to find their own connections to these narratives with regard to the dissonances and resonances of our variously textured experiences in a nation in which migration and immigration have so constantly constituted and shaped our lives;
  - to find their own pathways in building and sustaining the nation, while they, in their own turn, learn to function as ethical, socially responsible, upstanding citizens.

- to use their intellectual skills and resources comfortably and confidently to interact with others in responsible and respectful ways.

As a researcher and scholar, I have responded to these mandates through my work on the lives of women of African descent and their participation in public discourses and nation-building agenda. In the course of my work, I have been thoroughly inspired by these women. They have taught me who I am, what constitutes powerful and empowering anchors for the human enterprise, how to recognize sources of personal strength, as well as the contending forces that operate against positive and productive action, and how to sustain belief and action in the face of prevailing winds.

I don't know how much African American women's history you may know, but what might be instructive at this point is just for me to call the names of just twenty women from a very long list of exemplars of socio-political activism in order to suggest the richly endowed legacies of just this one specific group regarding their never-ending struggles for the United States, as a nation, to live up to its principles and possibilities. Over the past two centuries, these names have included women like the following:

1. Maria Stewart
2. Mary Shadd Carey
3. Sojourner Truth
4. Charlotte Forten Grimke
5. Frances Watkins Harper
6. Ida B. Wells-Barnett

7. Mary Church Terrell
8. Anna Julia Cooper
9. Pauline Hopkins
10. Gertrude Mossell
11. Amy Jacques Garvey
12. Sadie T.M. Alexander
13. Lorraine Hansberry
14. Pauli Murray
15. Angela Davis
16. Frances Beale
17. Audre Lorde
18. June Jordan
19. Alice Walker
20. Toni Morrison

These women have contributed vibrant threads for a cross-genre quilt of socio-political action in the interest of truth, freedom, justice, and equality for all. They have demonstrated a courage, passion, and a relentless persistence. They have, in fact, given texture to the meaning of ethical, socially responsible action in the building and sustaining of an ethical, socially responsible nation. They are, however, twenty among many within their own communities and well beyond. If you don't know them and others across the vast collective of activists over time who have served as the consciences of this nation; if you don't know about these lives and their broad and diverse contributions to our communities and the

national enterprise; if you don't know the work of women as their struggles continue to create the fluid narrative of civic engagement and to endow our social covenants, then it means, quite simply, that you don't know civil rights history. It means—still—that we have an incredible amount of work to do to make our nation into the nation grounded in democratic principles that it claims to be, and I for one am grateful that we have places, like the University of New Mexico, where such learning is possible in the face of such striking need. The dream of a “democratic” America, whether with a small “d” or a big “D,” remains, I dare say, a dream, albeit still a worthy one. Indeed, by all accounts, from the Jena 6, to a 13-year-old boy in Washington, D.C., to a noose that was hung in the backyard of an African American family recently in Hilliard, Ohio, to the unacknowledged and under-researched stories of struggle by ordinary people who have managed to accomplish extra-ordinary things, to this symposium in Albuquerque, New Mexico, all lead to the conclusion that we just are not there yet. We have a very long way to go—so far, in fact, that it is perennially my hope that more and more citizens will accept the basic maxim often attributed to Edmund Burke (Irish philosopher and statesman) which says that “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing,” or the charge from Bernice Reagon when she says, “Silence in a democracy is a dangerous thing” (Royster, “Responsible Citizenship, 41).

The least that we can be is critically conscious, which underscores the importance of this symposium in enhancing this capacity. The good news is that a solid cohort of researchers and scholars are helping us to know the ground on which we might stand so that we can be inspired and nourished by it. If you don't

know this body of work already, I suggest that you have before you a remarkable learning opportunity. A short list of initial references would include the following:

- My own co-edited volume, ***Calling Cards: Theory and Practice in the Study of Race, Gender, and Culture***, organized for scholars and researchers to reflect both methodologically and ideologically in considering the convergences of race, gender, and culture in their lives, their own research, and in their classroom practices, a means of casting light on civic engagement and social responsibility from the perspective of the academic arena.
- Paula Mathieu’s ***Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition***, Paula Mathieu examines literacies “on the street,” that is in the public setting, outside the academic arena or public schooling, documenting uses of literacy at the margins of society.
- Charlotte Hogg’s ***From the Garden Club***, in which she writes about the literacy practices of white rural women in Nebraska, including her grandmother and other women with whom she grew up. In a multi-genre text in which she documents how literacy functions in Paxton to build, sustain, and maintain a community.
- Gwen Pough’s ***Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere***, in which she critically examines hip-hop culture with a gendered lens

in order, as she says, “to find a means to harness the energy of the youth culture and revitalize its activist beginnings.”

- Katrina Powell’s study of “Virginia Mountain Women Writing to Government Officials: Letters of Request as Social Participation,” which documents the use of letter writing by women in Virginia during the 1930s when the Shenandoah National Park was created and “more than 500 families were displaced from their homes in Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains” (71). Powell documents and recast these women’s literate activities—once easily dismissed as the ranting of illiterate mountain women--as important acts of social engagement, neighborly collaboration, and civic resistance.
- Gail Okawa’s study of letters written by her grandfather while he was “imprisoned in an American internment camp on the mainland during World War II” (page xx), linking them to a broader array of literate practices in American internment camps as these citizens engaged in extensive literate activities to pass the time, to keep their sanity, as well as to create and nourish a sense of community that enhanced their capacity to survive oppression.
- Or your very own Michelle Hall Kells’ s ***Hector P. Garcia: Everyday Rhetoric and Mexican American Civil Rights***, which, as the title suggests documents the rhetorical practices and social activism of Garcia.

To be sure, these examples are literally the tip of an ever-growing mound of scholarship that functions to provide a more fully textured view of the legacies and potential of democratic action. To the extent that we have the capacity as citizens of a democratic nation to engage in our communities with socially responsible civic action, then we must know the ground on which we stand, and, I would proclaim, that we must understand the obligations that accrue as our growing knowledge dictates ethical, socially responsible, uses of this knowledge in an ongoing effort to bring to bolder, clearer, fuller relief core national values: truth, freedom, justice, and equality for all. What we know in the field of rhetoric, composition, and literacy is the inextricable linkages between literacy and social action and our obligations, therefore, to make those linkages conscious, deliberate, visible, and usable with consequence.

I end this presentation, then, as I began, emphasizing three points that I hope that you remember about literacy and civic engagement:

- Literacy is an instrument of power.
- A primary use of power is to fulfill needs and desires.
- Among the most persistent desires that human beings over the course of human history have exhibited are desires for: **freedom, justice, and the capacity to function with agency and authority within an accommodating environment**—which we often articulate as the capacity to have securely in one’s life food, clothing, shelter, and meaningful work, with a sense of community and a sense of prosperity.

These, in the United States of America, are deemed our **civil** rights, and we have slowly come to understand that in global context, they are our **human** rights.

This symposium rises to an occasion, then, in that we have also come to understand that rights—civil and human—engender obligations, the most basic of which is to be vigilant in keeping the notion of **rights** on our socio-political agenda, as individuals, in our various groups, and certainly on the campuses of our societal training grounds, our colleges and our university. So, I end, where I began with my thanks to Professor Kells, her colleagues, and the University of New Mexico for helping us to keep our attention on such important ideas, as well as on the types of actions that such principles and values mandate for us all as upstanding citizens in our nation and in our world.

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