

January 21, 2008 (Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day)

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Dear Rebecca,

A middle-aged Black woman peers through the window of a wooden shed with pride. The newly erected structure, 100 yards or so from where the levees broke during Hurricane Katrina, stands where the woman's brown brick house used to be. To some this rustic shack would be a poor substitute for a home that no longer exists; but for this St. Bernard's Parish woman who works down the road as a security guard at Camp Hope, this plywood box with a glass-less window provides the best view for optimism she's had in years. She's pleased Columbia and Chicago Public High School students took a week to build it after seven days prior hearing teary-eyed Lorraine Alexander proclaim, "I may never see my house on my lot, but I sure would love it if I could one day have my shed." She and two generations of her family live in two white FEMA trailers next to the shed.

Standing on the outside looking in is often the way many connected with poverty see privilege. It's the way some in the community see the Academy. Our hope was that our project might be a window in and a window out. In telling the story of the drama behind the comma, I'm reminded in this description of the process of the Critical Encounters Web Resource. It summons my main artistic discipline -- creative nonfiction. Within this genre, we spend considerable time employing dialogue, place-as-a-character, visuality, voice, research, and point-of-view with the author who often appears as a participant and observer when telling two-track narratives -- the outside and the inside, the public and the private story. One could say Kevin provided you the public story in Part One of the final report. In this Part Two of that same document where I'm thinking out loud, one might say is the private story.

Reflecting on that private story, I think about how I've defined the Critical Encounters Web Resource as a digital clearinghouse website where students, teachers and community sources can access accurate information about poverty and privilege. It's an info depot. It's a web link to our "communiversity," a term I appropriated from another local college's outreach to the wider community. While I had very little technical experience in web design, I had considerable experience in constructing narratives, building curricula and integrating them in ways students, teachers and community sources might find useful and interesting. I'm an adjunct professor in English, Television and Liberal Education in my ninth year at Columbia. I'm also a member of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. I'm trained as a reporter, documentary filmmaker and human rights activist. Kevin, the techie of our team, said putting the skeleton for the website would be easy if the story had a solid foundation. Since I'm the story guy, I took that cue and insisted we needed to do something different than had been done before. That translated into taking the 2006-2007 message and locating where, how and when it intersected with the

2007-2008 message. I guessed where there was consensus is where we should begin. As an interdisciplinary border crosser and a former foreign correspondent based primarily on contentious, war-torn borders (including the Gulf Region where sociology met hydrology in America's class and race conflict between Black and White, poor and wealthy), I've often found truth looking at what people(s) have in common more than what they have in conflict. Composition theorists would probably conclude that suggests I'm arguing to negotiate, meaning finding wider roads to understanding as opposed to just meeting in the middle as in a high-low bidding war with customers and a car salesman at an auto dealership. That said, the most time-consuming portion of our long process was gathering the narratives from the previous CE/HIV & AIDS and merging it with the new dispensation of CE/Poverty & Privilege. The logistical problem getting the principals together – Lott Hill and Ames Hawkins from the CE/HIV & AIDS with Stephanie Shonekan and Sandy Allen from the CE/Poverty & Privilege – was huge. It took several e-mails, phone calls and surprise visits before getting the print versions and later video versions. Kevin and I edited the print version. A student filmmaker, Kevin Caldwell, shot and edited the video version. We believe we reached our goal of a wider understanding of the two different, yet related initiatives. Corny as it sounds, we feel the sum was greater than the parts. We call the end result our "master narrative." <http://www.colum.edu/criticalencounters/>

As an artist of color who is culturally Black but also Native American (Cherokee) and from a working-class background on Chicago's South Side, my prism synthesizing information is different from Kevin's, which I believe was one of many reasons he invited me on this adventure, and perhaps also why you thought my diversity might help this project centered on the theme of poverty and privilege – who's got it, who doesn't, and why? I appreciated the outreach and delighted in the fact that finally being a person of color from a working-class background was a benefit, not a deterrent, to success.

What is success? For the Summer and Fall, our assessment was primarily anecdotal. Kevin received praise for sending e-mails to the whole task force in the early summer announcing he would take photos of each and every person to place on the website mockup. The photos were taken at the late June meeting that was well-attended, partly because everyone wanted to be included. This gave the initiative a more democratic aura. Kevin was praised for thinking this through. He received high marks, too, for solving the "legacy" problem of archiving old documents from the CE/HIV & AIDS, creating an archive format for next year's Critical Encounters to eliminate worry over lost files. Perhaps his highest praise came from the Task Force for designing an intuitive website where questions from people on how to get involved with Critical Encounters could more easily be answered with this site than with the previous one, which was the very first one. The key new polished elements to solve this problem included a more user-friendly page design, a more focused mission statement complete with video downloads, and podcasts.

I organized a podcast/WNUA broadcast with key teacher/student/community resource players during one of the two summer meetings. During this same period, I traveled with one of my teen twin sons, Jordan, and 42 high schoolers in Saturday Scholars and Columbia College students and faculty to New Orleans. We gathered new rich media content including a CD of Lorraine Alexander's famous son, Quentin "Shakespeare," Alexander, a performance poet featured on HBO's "Def Poetry Jam" and Spike Lee's "When the Levees Broke." That CD, "I Don't Know How to Feel" featured Columbia College Fiction

instructor Cynthia Woodfolk, her high school daughter, Kim, and her Columbia College son, Martez, doing background vocals. This CD's poignant music and lyrics will be uploaded in the Spring. Also, we captured a podcast/WNUA broadcast of "Shakespear" that will also find its way on our website. We also have photos of Shakespear, his son, "Little Shake" and Lorraine Alexander, the matriarch of the family. After capturing a recent M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of New Orleans, for personal reasons, I was especially proud to have helped include my own family...once again...on the Katrina story. My family and I were in New Orleans hours before Hurricane Katrina hit in a successful attempt to rescue my twins' godmother.

<http://wednesdayjournalonline.com/main.asp?Search=1&ArticleID=2550&SectionID=3&SubSectionID=&S=1>

My experience in New Orleans, connecting community with academia, continues to inform our project. It influences my desire to do objective and subjective assessment. Take for instance how we prepared for this final report. As team members, we summarized what worked and what did not primarily from feedback from students, teachers, community sources, CE honchos, and ourselves. For example, the head of Critical Encounters, Dr. Stephanie Shonekan, adored our initial template we sent in June, but became impatient, as did we, that Serena Collage gatekeepers and their integral process, made it difficult to get our site up prior to the second week of the Fall semester. CE/Poverty & Privilege had a huge rollout the first week of the semester and wanted to aggressively promote the schedule of new activities on the website, but could not because of the initial delay. This caused some frustration. Kevin seemed to get the brunt of the complaints. In mid-August meetings and e-mails he acknowledged the reasonable complaints, offering the logistical realities of this new dispensation. He went out of his way to take responsibility, though the delay was not really his fault, or really anyone's fault considering the newness of the website and the new protocols. Once our site was finally up in late August, word at CE Task Force meetings describing the site included adjectives like "fabulous," "magnificent," "user-friendly," "rich with possibilities," and "comprehensive," and folks seemed to have forgotten the initial delay in getting the site launched. As a stop gap measure waiting for clearance we put up a site heralding the first exhibit of the Fall Season, "Vodou Riche." Many people said they saw the site, then visited the exhibit. For example, NMS instructors connected with Critical Encounters said seeing the site at the CE spot reminded them that maybe they should take their classrooms to the "Vodou Riche" exhibit. Our link to that exhibit explained how despite the negative Hollywood portrayals, Vodou is a West African religion transplanted here in the West. Its art often uses found objects. While Vodou's epicenter in Haiti (where I have relatives and did considerable reporting for Radio Kiskeya and WNUA 95.5 FM) is the poorest country in the western hemisphere, it is ironically the richest country in its artistic production. Here's a link about student, faculty and community involvement.

<http://wjinc.com/main.asp?SectionID=4&SubSectionID=4&ArticleID=9379&TM=24344.9>
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Working with fellow Tech Fellow, Barb Iverson, we linked another column I wrote with community commentary on a blog with a YouTube video of one of my recent films, "The Achievement Gap: From a Student's Perspective." This film was screened at the CE Film Series on "Suburban Shorts" (see the PDF on our website) and featured a panel with students and faculty who live in Oak Park. People in the community responded. Meanwhile, here's the Barb Iverson link:

<http://creatingcommunityconnections.org/node/2988>

In recognizing my limited technical experience, I took several CIT Fall Workshops to sharpen my technical expertise: DVD Pro Workshop, Final Cut Workshop and Podcasting Workshop where, thanks to Wojciech Lorenc, I created two student-directed podcasts on Sudan that should be still up on the college's I-Tunes university site. Perhaps we can link it to our "From the Classroom" section on the CE site, which features student work. Spring semester I've registered for Photoshop, Final Cut Pro, Classroom Technology, Podcasting, and DVD Pro. Wojciech can give you an objective assessment of my progress with new tech tools. I should add that both of the Sudan films, which were shot in the New Millennium Studies (NMS) classrooms, were featured at the NMS Millefest. Here's a link: <http://www.colum.edu/Academics/FYS/MilleFest/Millefest.php>

One of the outcomes of the Podcasting Workshop will be a Saturday Scholars podcast and a broadcast on WNUA 95.5 FM featuring Chicago area high school students at Columbia's Saturday Scholars (SS) program, speaking about why we should care about the post-Katrina citizens in New Orleans. WNUA is one of our community partners. There will soon be a podcast link to the WNUA 95.5 FM "City Voices" website. Here's a generic SS link: http://www.colum.edu/CCAP/Programs/About_Saturday_Scholars.php

Since one of the new sections of our site was "Roots and Routes," a section where in the Spring we'll be uploading new essays and archiving the Fall ones, I'm honored to share a narrative that featured photos by my teenage son, Amman, to a German concentration camp outside of Brussels, Belgium called "Breendonk."
<http://www.columbiachronicle.com/paper/campus.php?id=4483>
http://www.colum.edu/criticalencounters/Roots_and_Routes/index.php

Amman and other high schoolers will travel with a Columbia contingent to New Orleans in Spring 2008. We'll add photos, blogs, podcasts and video from the journey to our site. One of our early community partners to view the proposed website template and the Saturday Scholars' website and respond with gusto was Academy Award-nominated director Spike Lee, who was thrilled that Saturday Scholars/CE Poverty & Privilege went to New Orleans to chronicle the post-Katrina narrative. After contacting Saturday Scholars in late July, he sent us a two-minute promo praising our journey to New Orleans that soon will be prominent on our site as evidence our college connects the community.

The public purpose of this project was to create a web-based resource for extending what Critical Encounters does to make it more accessible through integrated technology allowing more stakeholders to access and add content. The architecture for the CE Web Resource, launched in the Fall with an important mission statement and few links, is expected to be expanded to include rich media content. One of the more compelling components of the project will be the use of classroom curricula gathered by the team and built by members of the CE Colloquium on Poverty & Privilege last Spring. Both components (mission statement and curriculum) build a structure that will help mold future Critical Encounters, including the 2008-2009 proposed "Human/Nature" initiative. It might be useful to this initiative for our team to continue this necessary work.

The private purpose, at least for tech-challenged wordsmith, was to gain new tools to help teachers, students, community folk, and me be more effective providing windows into social and economic justice as well as equality in gender and sexual orientation issues. This ties in with Columbia's mission, CE's mission, CIT's, and my mission. I believe you and Kevin are in concert with this message and how it informed our project. This project has given me more confidence working with hardware and software that I probably would have otherwise avoided. Kevin has been rather gracious pulling me along this road to discovery and delivery. I think I surprised him with my rich media content production and hustle. Two factors helping me was the fact I was on both the CE Task Force and the CE Colloquium, and that I was skilled producing audio, video, print and online content.

For the Spring, we'd like to gather more statistical data from surveys, website hits, and independent monitors such as: Dr. Soo La Kim, associate director for the Center for Teaching Excellence; Thom Clark, president, Community Media Workshop; Miguel Gonzalez, former vice president and creative director Leo Burnett ad agency; and Yves Hughes, Jr., president and CEO, NextDoor Multimedia. We'd also like to include best assessment practices from Tech Fellow colleagues: Suzanne Blum Malley, Beau Beaudoin, and Suzanne McBride, whose content and audience mirror ours, and who I work with in Liberal Education, Television and Journalism. (I do guest lectures in Journalism). Additionally, we'd like to analyze the results on how well the CE Web Resource worked with students, teachers and community sources using the most up-to-date, rigorous scholarly tools and expertise offered by the CASTL Institute during a three-day retreat in June in Nebraska. We might focus primarily on the student response to the curriculum PDF files Kevin and I will upload this spring to ascertain whether or not it was effective, how many teachers used it, which departments, which teachers, how many students benefited, how students' views on poverty and privilege have changed, and what is the evidence?
<http://www.colum.edu/CTE/2008CASTL/index.php>

As I conclude this reflective letter describing the private story of our oft-public process, I'm hopeful that insights might be culled from our successes and failures. We try to challenge audiences, and ourselves and offer them glimpses of how we expose "our own betrayals, uncertainties, and mistrusts," which is how essayist Philip Lopate describes this pact with audiences in the introduction to his The Art of the Personal Essay (xxvi). Perhaps how Kevin and I continue to overcome some of the project obstacles is as instructive as the result. In other words, the process is as important as the process...we think. Peering through her new shed window, Lorraine Alexander is likely to agree.

Sincerely,

Stan West