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Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition

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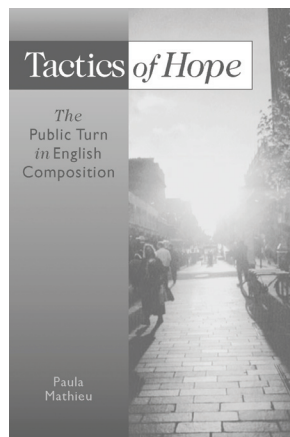
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Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition. Paula Mathieu. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 2005. 176 pp. ISBN: 978-0867095784. \$21.50.

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Tactics of Hope opens with a scene from the urban horror film *Candyman*, in which two female university students head into the famed Cabrini Green housing project in Chicago in order to gather research for a thesis project. When confronted by a local resident who demands to know what the two graduate students are doing poking around one Cabrini apartment, the students assure the resident that they are not, despite appearances, the police; rather, they confidently declare, they are from the local university. The resident, apparently not impressed by the students' academic credentials, replies, "Well, you don't belong here."

This tension, between university expert and neighborhood resident, centers Paula Mathieu's *Tactics of Hope*, a well-written and thought-provoking inquiry into the often fraught relationships between universities and their surrounding "communities"—an all too neat *topos* that Mathieu takes pains to complicate and de-stabilize—within the "public turn" in Composition Studies.

As Mathieu explains, and as we can surely see from the changing nature of courses on our campuses:

This *public turn* in composition studies more generally asks teachers to connect the writing that students and they themselves do with "real world" texts, events, or exigencies. At the heart of this call to the streets is a desire for writing to enter civic debates; for street life to enter classrooms through a focus on local, social issues; for students to hit the streets by performing service,

and for teachers and scholars to conduct activist or community-grounded research (1-2).

Key to Mathieu's project is a critical analysis of the academy's relationship with what she terms "the streets," pushing composition administrators and instructors to embrace the opportunities for academic learning and activism that arise from the public turn, while suggesting that the university's increasing focus on the streets should never be positioned as a strictly unquestioned good.

As an Associate Professor of English at Boston College and a long-time member of the international street paper movement, Mathieu's *ethos*, her ability to write from *within* the public turn, allows her to rely upon her own experiences inside and outside of the classroom to launch a critique of the oft-lacking reciprocity in street-writing curricula.

The first chapter of *Tactics of Hope*, "Composition in the Streets," catalogs various types of street writing in the university, offers a literature review for those unfamiliar with the field, and lays out the theoretical framework for her analysis, a framework that is sorely lacking in some other pedagogical studies of service learning style projects.

Mathieu draws heavily from Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, particularly from his delineation of *tactics* and *strategies*. This scaffolding works extremely well for Mathieu's rhetorically informed project, as it allows the reader to distinguish between strategic, (highly structured, institutionalized, spatialized) and tactical (mal-leable, deterritorialized) street writing projects. As Mathieu explains,

[de Certeau] describes *strategies* as calculated actions that emanate from and depend upon 'proper' (as in propertied) spaces, like corporations, state agencies, and educational institutions, and relate to others via this proper space... On the other hand, *tactics*, according to de Certeau, are at one's disposal when one "cannot count on a 'proper' (a spatial or institutionalized location, nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality)" (16).

In fact, the entire project of *Tactics of Hope* is an argument for tactical over strategic projects, a critique of composition courses that take writing to the streets in increasingly institutionalized, inflexible, and non-reciprocal ways.

But to suggest that *Tactics of Hope* is strictly a critique would be misleading; this is, as the title suggests, a hopeful book, filled with recommendations, suggestions, and possibilities. The chapters that follow "Composition in the Streets"—"Writing in the Streets," "Street Life in the Classroom," "Students in the Streets," and "Teachers/Writers/Scholars in the Streets"—cull the best examples from Mathieu's and others' experiences in both the classroom and the street paper movement, liberally offering credit where credit is due to her students, colleagues, and local activists, in order to offer a model for street writing courses that work in tandem with, rather than against, the strengths and needs of local agencies and community groups.

Tactics of Hope is likely to draw criticism from faculty and administrators working in institutionalized service learning programs, and, perhaps, this criticism is reason-

able. For many composition instructors and administrators, institutionalization of street writing programs becomes the best way to legitimize street writing endeavors in the face of university resistance. For faculty and instructors putting in the hours necessary to maintain community relationships—on top of large course loads and the demands of writing and research—institutionalization can be a way to legitimize this “service” in the eyes of tenure review boards and grant funding committees.

And yet, Mathieu’s style of teaching is not for the faint of heart. Despite the investment of time and energy, the whole point of a tactical approach is that it embraces chaos and risk and allows the very uncertainty of these types of relationships to become teachable moments. And, if the stories that Mathieu relays in her book are any indication, the teachable moments that emerge from this uncertainty are some of the best.

This is not to say that Mathieu positions herself as having all of the answers, nor does a tactical approach to Composition Studies offer a panacea for all of the complications that emerge from university-street partnerships. Mathieu explains in no uncertain terms in the conclusion of *Tactics of Hope* that her book moves us towards “always-tentative, always-insufficient tactical responses” (134). Still, insufficiency is no reason not to forge ahead. For, as Mathieu concludes:

Hope, defined in critical terms, requires the ability to recognize the radical insufficiency of any actions, be honest in assessing their limitations, imagine better ways to act and learn, and despite the real limitations, engage creative acts of work and play with an eye toward a better not-yet future. (134)

Readers who dismiss Mathieu’s project on the assumption that *Tactics*’ hopeful recommendations will be naïve and unrealistic are missing out. What Mathieu offers readers, instead, is a theoretically and rhetorically informed, pedagogically rigorous model for what street writing at its best can be.

And, after all, maybe what Composition Studies most needs right now is a little dose of hope.