

# Preface

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One way to read the collected essays of Stephen Parks is as a necessary record of political, institutional, and disciplinary impediments to systemic change. Despotic regimes torture and kill activists, institutions conserve and withhold power, academics use our voices for safety rather than speaking hard truths, money is funneled away from the public and into the private. These essays document, too, a collective and individual failure to listen across political, national, race, and class divides, resulting in missed opportunities to cultivate what Parks and fellow activists call the “middle,” the large swath of people who together can bring about change. Read this way, *On the Wrong Side of Privilege* is a sobering account.

But reading these essays for only their analysis of power would miss the relentless optimism and love that pulse through even Parks’ most upsetting accounts of injustice. Each essay is a new foray into possibilities for peace.

In the context of punishing local and/or global conditions, Parks and his collaborators document dynamic, and often fraught, processes of coalition building. Parks works these coalitional accounts into theory—and from there, theorizes new coalitional possibilities, all with a palpable impatience with the isolationist tendencies of the academy. From the first to the last essay, Parks asks readers to consider what scholarship in any discipline is for, if not as a means to bring about real change in people’s lives.

“How do we understand our responsibility as academics to develop ways of speaking that, in conjunction with activism, can blunt barbarity and produce an expansion of fundamental human rights?” Parks and his collaborators ask. It is a hopeful question. An empowering question. A question both theoretical and practical. If there were a thesis statement to the essays represented here, it might be this: *It is our responsibility as academics to speak and work, with others, to blunt barbarity.*

From New City Press to Syrians for Truth and Justice, the collaborative projects described here link grassroots community writing and publishing to nothing less than “local and global attempts to foster democratic dialogue and democratic rights” (Chapter 8). Consider for example the STJ website, produced and maintained with international intellectuals and activists from the region, that documents the torture of Syrians under Assad (Chapter 9). Also consider the Democratic Futures Project, through which Parks invites international activists into his writing classroom, activists who don’t understand the concept of giving up, because they cannot.

It is in service to this larger calling that the essays collected here negotiate the terms of the field of writing and rhetoric, touching on WAC, cultural studies, community-engaged literacy, writing about writing. While Parks has said he has been labeled more an activist than a writing and rhetoric scholar (as if the two roles had nothing to do with each other), each essay in this collection pushes on the terms in which our field sees itself, testing out their usefulness in the larger project of justice and peace.

If in one way, then, this collection of essays represents the work of a scholar-activist, Stephen Parks, whose collaborative work has shaped a field, in another way, the point these essays make again and again is that there isn't a static "field"—and that there is certainly no static Stephen Parks.

To this point, one of the beautiful things about this book is the descriptions of failure—of failure to give credit where credit was due, of failure to acknowledge privilege, of failure to foresee a problem that caused a project to go awry. As of this writing in 2024, we are facing multiple crises, global and local. I find Parks' worldview here—that there is no political purity, that there is only keeping our sights set on the bigger goals necessary to community thriving, especially when we fail—profoundly encouraging. This book made me sit up a little straighter. It made me consider anew, as I imagine it will many readers, what it is I might do with both my words and the power to which I have access.

These essays tell us stories of powerful factions, of big ideas, of what we can accomplish when we work together. But as in any worthwhile human endeavor, there are plot twists. My favorite sentence in this book might be, "And then it got complicated."

And it does! It gets complicated!

But we can do complicated. We must.