

## **Others' Voices: Why *Dispatches from the Street*?<sup>1</sup>**

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She slept in tents on the street to write about the homeless, worked in the fields to write about migrant workers and sat through countless meetings of patriot groups to write about their politics. "Deborah was always interested in giving voice to the voiceless," said her brother Gordon Kaplan. (Seattle P-I, 2006, Nov 23)

Deb Kaplan, who wrote the paper which follows, died unexpectedly in November 2006. As a faculty colleague and a graduate advisee, we felt this as a terrible personal loss. Our loss was compounded by the fact that Deb had only just started coming into her stride, moving her doctoral research towards publication and initiating important new projects. While finishing off her PhD at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, she had joined the University of Washington as an Assistant Professor in September 2003 and brought with her a different perspective on academic life. This is how she described herself in her job application:

I am a non traditional student, having toughed my way into newspapers without the benefit of a college degree. I founded Detroit's first youth-run, mass circulation tabloid while speeding through an accelerated undergraduate degree program at one of the country's first 'universities without walls,' the Union Institute in Cincinnati, Ohio. I returned to college at age 40, when I was at mid career and increasingly frustrated by the routines of reporting.

For most of her short time at the University of Washington, Deb consistently doubted her worthiness as an academic – in spite of constant feedback to the contrary from her colleagues and students. It's for this reason especially that we wanted to submit *Dispatches from the Street* for publication; we simply wanted to prove the point to her once and for all. In truth, however, we really wanted this paper to be read by others because it's a good paper on an important topic and we were afraid that it would simply be lost. We're glad the paper's three anonymous reviewers all shared this opinion; here's what one of them wrote:

This is a very well-written study that provides a finely textured account of the complex constructions of meaning generated by these "campers"/informants, shedding particular light on their clear awareness of the social and political implications of their situation and their active response to that situation as part and parcel of their "survival." This work makes an important contribution.

### **Intercultural communication, class inequality and social change**

It is the absence of any discussion in Intercultural Communication about what constitutes the "difference" of our work which is often problematic. Too easily and too often we default to only the most obvious, most comfortable or most fashionable forms of cultural difference. Indeed, for Bourdieu and Wacquant (2001), we simply become part of the neoliberal "planetary vulgate" which omits terms like exploitation, domination and inequality altogether. As a consequence,

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both public and academic discourse is sanitized and retains an unduly tidy, taken-for-granted notion of otherness. One of the dangers, for example, in focusing the subject of Intercultural Communication too heavily on international foreign-ness is that it perpetuates the reductionism of the culture-nation conflation so long a hallmark of commercially-driven intercultural studies (e.g., Hofstede, 1991). By the same token, an emphasis on the differences of race/ethnicity encourages the continual fetishizing of artifacts and phenotypes – an institutional containment of difference/diversity disguised as celebration and curiosity. And yet, the challenge of interculturality is usually far less obvious not least because difference is also always within.

The stranger is thus ...not the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather the person who comes today and stays tomorrow. ...The stranger, like the poor and like sundry 'inner enemies', is an element of the group itself. His position as a full-fledged member involves both being outside it and confronting it. (Simmel, 1950; Wolff, trans.)

It is no coincidence that Simmel's notion of the stranger is arguably the founding concept of contemporary intercultural communication scholarship (Rogers, 1999). Inherited via the tremendous influence of the 1930s Chicago School of sociology and with a renewed currency in the work of scholars like Gudykunst (1995), the breadth and simplicity of Simmel's "stranger" lends itself to a more critical, even radical approach to interculturality. As Thurlow (2004) has noted before, it's also the more generic experience of discomfort and unease (or uncertainty, in Gudykunst's terms) arising from encounters with Stranger that splits interculturality open to a more appropriate conceptualization of, and a far more inclusive engagement with more subtle, more diverse manifestations of cultural difference. In particular, when scholars reconceive intercultural Other as "stranger in our midst's," they are directed to the possibility of a far more localized and often more challenging type of difference. *Dispatches from the Street* demonstrates what this looks like in practice – what happens when communication scholarship engages with social movement research and with issues of class exploitation, domination and inequality.

Social movement research has long focused attention on the public portrayal of social change in protests and direct actions aimed at garnering media attention, public outrage and political reform. Unfortunately, this focus on high-visibility political action has meant that the daily struggle of many marginalized "local Others" falls by the wayside. Shifting attention to the productive work of resistance in "ordinary" language, however, allows scholars to rethink talk *as* action – and as action which might otherwise be dismissed as ineffectual. In fact, as Scott (1990) comments, it is the symbolic capital of everyday discourse which is often of particular importance to people who lack the economic/material capital many others take for granted. It is also among these oppressed communities that the "hidden transcripts" of social change may be given voice and made public.

Suffering from the same humiliations or, worse, subject to the same terms of subordination, they have a shared interest in jointly creating a discourse of dignity, of negation, and of justice. They have...a shared interest in concealing a social site apart from domination where such a hidden transcript can be elaborated in comparative safety. (Scott, 1990, p. 114)

As we see in *Dispatches from the Street*, Deb Kaplan's work was all about finding these social spaces of resistance, befriending her informants and gaining insight into their lives through ethnographic emersion. She was inspired by work which examined the "subculture of street life" with its "matrix of social-service and control agencies" and its "emergent moral code" (Snow

and Anderson, 1993, p. 76-77), but her critical perspective demanded more than sociological typologies. Deb tried, as a participant observer, to represent everyday discourse as a legitimate theoretical and political exercise – something that actively confronts the context of denigration and subordination surrounding those who do not play by “the rules” of “the system.” As such, her informants’ communicative actions are given recognition in their own right. The central thrust of the study she reports in *Dispatches from the Street* seems to have been to understand “how disempowered people build a collective sense of political agency, how they create autonomous spheres of action and how they challenge dominant ways of seeing things.” It is that we see her work making the important shift from “advocacy” to “empowerment” (cf Cameron *et al.*, 1992). Through what another of her anonymous reviewers described as the “high quality of prose” and the “thoughtful and caring way in which the project was carried out,” Deb aims to redefine her informants’ symbolic strategies as social and political action. The cross-cultural mythology of the helpless, destitute “homeless” is thereby translated and transformed into a mode of resistance by which a “separate way of life” (p. xx) is created in which “the whole world is my home” (p. 22).

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