From Tragedy to Reality:
Analyzing the Rhetoric of Inner-City Communities and Their Members

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"First, we need a more realistic understanding of America's inner cities. They are socially and culturally heterogeneous, and a great majority of residents are law-abiding, God-fearing and often socially conservative."

-*Orlando Patterson,* New York Times

Born into a family of African American and Guyanese descent, I was well aware of the rhetoric surrounding minorities and inner-city communities that was established long before I was brought into this world. I grew up as a resident of Deanwood, a small community located in Ward 7 of Washington D.C., and always strived to beat the odds and prove the common stereotypes wrong. With U.S. Census Bureau (2010) data describing the region's population as disadvantaged and economically unequipped, it is difficult for many on the outside looking in to believe that there are any who don't fall into these labels. Based on my own experiences, I found that I had certain advantages by being an inner-city youth. In the very community I grew up in, I was crowned the first Queen of the Nannie Helen Burroughs Day Parade, served as a Historic Trail Guide on the Deanwood Trail, and won a poetry contest at my local library, Dorothy Heights Public Library. These moments are special to me because they display how Ward 7 not only celebrates its people, but also honors its historical prominence as well. Being a part of these events educated me about how Ward 7 has enriched the history of the Washington metropolitan area as a whole. I have had the unique opportunity and privilege of creating history in a region that has been written off by the rest of society.

As a native Washingtonian, I understand what the inner city looks like and what it is gradually progressing towards. A few decades ago, Washington D.C. was considered "Chocolate City," as a majority of the population was African American. The U Street Corridor is infamous because of the presence of Ben's Chili Bowl, a hub for the neighborhood's working and middle class African Americans since its opening in the mid-1900s. Surviving the riots of the 1960s, economic hardships of the 1970s and 80s, and the revitalization of the U Street Corridor that began in the 90s, Ben's Chili Bowl has continued to be able to cater to and establish relationships with not only its neighbors, but also many prominent African American leaders, including President Barack Obama. The H Street Corridor leads to Union Station, home to some of the most popular eateries and shopping outlets in the area. During my childhood, my family and I enjoyed sunny Saturday afternoons patronizing these establishments, communing with others who decided to venture out.

Chocolate City was not only reflected in these hot spots, but also on the very street I grew up on. I fondly remember my childhood spent on the porch of my house, drinking Everfresh cranberry apple juice with my cousins that we bought from our local corner store. We watched intently as cars rode by, blasting the District's very own "go-go" with Chuck Brown's distinct voice spilling from their speakers. Sometimes, when the car stopped on our street, we would have enough time to stand up and dance along to the beat. Laughter was shared my cousins in those moments, and every summer was spent enjoying myself on my porch with them. Cookouts also were permanent fixtures of my childhood. Backyards were decorated with balloons, tables,

chairs, and the best stereo in our house. With a mixture of R&B, go-go, and the latest pop tracks coming from the speakers, cookouts were a time to show off your best dance moves, reconnect with your favorite cousin, and stuff your face with the best soul food. The entire neighborhood practiced this tradition and welcomed each other's affairs wholeheartedly. Even when the dancing lasted beyond sunset, our entire street seemed to smile at the sight of our family members enjoying spending time with each other.

Eventually, these moments in my childhood happened less and less due to gentrification. Our favorite "mom and pop" shops were bought out by investors who envisioned condominiums instead. Funding was cut for many of the revitalization initiatives that were planned for the community in exchange for new stores, shops, and tourist attractions. During the mid to late 1900s, the District of Columbia was once a haven for African Americans, as over 70% of the population of the entire city was African American. As gentrification emerges and the decline of many black-owned family businesses continues, black residents have been forced into small pockets within the District, mainly Ward 7 and Ward 8. The District of Columbia is divided into four quadrants and eight wards. The four quadrants of the city are Northwest, Northeast, Southwest, and Southeast, and the wards are spread across these quadrants in a fairly equal manner. However, Wards 7 and 8 are located in the Northeast and Southeast quadrants of the District, which is east of the Anacostia River, widely known as the polluted counterpart to the Potomac River that also runs through the city. When looking at the demographics of the District as a whole, Wards 7 and 8 are the only two regions that have more than a 90% population of African Americans, along with having 30% of their residents living below the poverty line and 22% who are unemployed (American Community Survey 2014). Instead of being viewed as an asset to the city, the African American population is presumed to be a part of the problem by developers and community outsiders who do not understand how this population contributes to the District's cultural diversity. With this information in mind, I decided to complete an analysis of a local community service organization that aims to empower members of the District's inner-city communities: STRIVE NextStep DC. Using the rhetoric of tragedy and conservative behaviorists, I will offer a new way to describe the inner city and its community members by offering the rhetoric of "urban realism."

Throughout this analysis, I utilize the word "community." When I am coming to terms with the subject, the meaning of "community" is a group of people who inhabit and co-exist within a certain area of space. As I move into the deeper analysis of STRIVE's rhetoric, "community" refers to the physical space and environment that a group of people inhabits, and "community members" refers to the actual people who live in the community. This distinction is imperative in understanding how community is defined in a general sense and when the rhetoric of STRIVE describes it.

STRIVE NextStep DC

There are many service organizations in the District that work toward the repair and renewal of inner-city communities. Most of this volunteer work is expressed in tutoring, leadership, and skill-training programs that encourage the communities to grow and community members to become better people, such as in Higher Achievement and Life Pieces to Masterpieces. However, organizations can inadvertently harm their public image through the rhetoric that is used to describe the communities that are served. For the purposes of this analytical effort, the site of focus is STRIVE NextStep D.C., which is the product of a

collaboration between NextStep, Children's National Medical Center, and The George Washington University. Founded in 2001 by Bill Kubicek and Paul Newman, NextStep is designed to "shatter limitations and elevate aspirations of teens and young adults living with life-threatening diseases during their transition to adulthood and into an adult healthcare system" (NextStep). University students are recruited as mentors for youth participants who are brought in from Children's National Medical Center's sickle cell outpatient clinic. This program fosters long-lasting relationships between the mentors and their mentees, as most of the adolescents remain in the program for the duration of their high school career and mentors are required to dedicate the entire school year to the commitment of serving as mentors. STRIVE NextStep (2014) aims to usher a new generation of adolescents with sickle cell disease into a brighter and satisfying future (1).

Having firsthand knowledge about the rhetoric of inner-city communities from my own experience is one of the main reasons why I was so drawn to serving STRIVE NextStep DC. I was thrilled at the prospect of working with adolescents who I knew were going to be bright, brilliant, and fearless in spite of any challenges or difficulties they may have faced. However, there was something that stood out to me: its program materials and website. In the organization's publications and website, I observed that the socioeconomic status and disparities faced by the participants were highlighted more than the achievements made in their communities. I believed that this was completely inappropriate because it not only stigmatized those who participated in the program, but also set the standard for how others should discuss inner-city youth. When I attended my first program, I was surprised that the reality of the situation was completely opposite of my pre-existing impression of the organization. Not only was the environment warm, safe, and welcoming, but the "at-risk" status was the furthest thing from everyone's mind and conversation. I was astounded, and immediately thought that there was something seriously wrong with this situation. Why is it that my first impression of STRIVE NextStep DC did not match the reality of my experience?

As I contemplated this question, I referred to my prior knowledge about the reputations that the District's inner-city communities have. I understand that there are places in the city that are sorely neglected and riddled with problems that go ignored by the city, including lack of educational resources, affordable housing, and recreational centers. In these instances, it is indeed difficult for members of these communities to have access to better opportunities, and as a result, creates a noticeable disadvantage when these regions are compared to more affluent neighborhoods. Although I am acknowledging that the statistical data presented by the Census and American Community Survey is indeed accurate, I am asserting that we do not need to lead with this information because this is not the reality of every inner-city youth.

The Rhetoric of Tragedy

In her article, "The Rhetorics of the Farm Crisis: Toward Alternative Agrarian Literacies in a Globalized World," university professor and analyst Eileen Schell (2007) analyzes the rhetoric of smart diversification, rural literacy, and tragedy. Her purpose in writing this article is to encourage those outside of the farming community to view the farm crisis from a different perspective in order to create more positive outlooks. She sets out to offer a more realistic way of discussing the farm crisis by providing factual evidence, offering the rhetoric of sustainability, and using Farm Aid as a means of understanding how to make the transition to utilizing a more appropriate rhetoric to represent farm communities (Schell 2007).

Schell is informing the reader on how the *rhetoric of tragedy* creates the appearance of desperation of the farming community to outsiders, leading to the consensus that it is to be pitied and comforted during its trying times (78). Schell enters the discussion about the farm crisis plaguing small U.S. farms in rural towns by outlining its three major causes: "chronically low prices, the consolidation of agribusiness and the retail food industry, and international trade policies that benefit global agribusiness companies at the expense of family farms, local businesses and rural communities" (77-78). Immediately, the context has been provided by highlighting the fact that these farms are small, vulnerable businesses compared to those of commercial stature. She moves on and outlines vividly the repercussions of this occurrence: the pathos-driven rhetoric of tragedy (Schell 78). Schell illustrates the role that the rhetoric of tragedy plays in this discussion by connecting it with "'traditional rural literacy,' a literacy that reads rural life through nostalgia for the past and efforts to return rural communities to the way they once were" (78). From this, we can determine that Schell is identifying that the community members who did not farm began to discuss the impacted farmers in a way that induced pity and an air of reminisce (93).

The Rhetoric of Conservative Behaviorists

In *Race Matters*, Dr. Cornel West (2001) takes a look at the African American community, as he identifies two rhetorics that are potentially leading to the nihilism of the demographic group: the rhetoric of liberal structuralists and conservative behaviorists. In the first chapter, Dr. West examines the differences that lie between the two rhetorics by coming to terms with each one. West defines liberal structuralists as those who "call for full employment, health, education, and child-care programs, and broad affirmative action practices," and conservative behaviorists as "those who promote self-help programs, black business expansion, and non-preferential job practices" (18). The supporters of the liberal structuralist movement believe that the government is responsible for correcting the problems present in inner-city communities, and therefore, should devote more money and resources to finding and implementing solutions. Conservative behaviorists imply that the members of the community are the problems that need to be addressed because of lack of skill-development, entrepreneurship, and leadership. The proposed concept of conservative behaviorism suggests that by providing support systems, skill training, and apprenticeships, the deeper-rooted issues would be corrected.

West (2001) conducts this analysis for minority-based activists and organizations in an effort to shift concentration away from fixing the members of the community to drawing attention to deeper-rooted issues and concerns by understanding the *politics of conversion*. The politics of conversion encourages those in the Black community to not only remain aware of how the environment aligns with the root issue, but also encourages community members to take a leadership role in improving the state of their communities (29-31). The politics of conversion is a concept that focuses on empowering the members of a community to spearhead new initiatives aimed at strengthening the community as a whole. Based on this information, it is understood that service organizations centered in inner-city communities are not to come in with the intent of "fixing" the community, but to come with the intent of partnering with the members of the community as a source of support and expanded resources.

The Rhetoric of Tragedy and Conservative Behaviorists

The rhetoric of tragedy that Schell (2007) discusses in her analysis is very similar to how I identify this rhetoric in STRIVE NextStep DC's program materials. Schell (2007) outlines how the media forwarded the rhetoric of tragedy by creating a narrative where "the viewers are witness to the suffering of the farm family, its interrelational dramas, and its likely dispossession, which is portrayed as the 'cost' for modern efficiency" (93). I have been able to identify the rhetoric of tragedy in STRIVE NextStep DC's program materials and website because of the language used to describe the background of the participants. In STRIVE Next Step's program overview sheet (2014) and website, the mentees are described as "low-income minority teenagers in Washington D.C. living with sickle cell disease, an incurable disease" (1). The overview and website go on to explain that the program is needed because these youths are the most vulnerable living in these urban areas, and because of the disadvantages of their location, education, socioeconomic, and medical statuses, they are more likely "to stay locked in the cycle of poverty" (1) and developmental delays. Although this may appear to be relatively insignificant alone, its importance is implied by the fact that this language appears in all of the organization's program materials multiple times. From this, an outsider is likely to feel a sense of pity for the mentees because of how disadvantaged they are portrayed to be, making potential mentors feel the need to come in and "fix the poor children." Through the website, flyer (2014), and program overview document (2014), STRIVE mentors are automatically led to believe that if they are able to ensure their mentees make remarkable progress, they have contributed to fixing a community problem and reducing the risk of failure.

The notion of "fixing" community members is exactly what West (2001) identifies as the problematic rhetoric of conservative behaviorist. STRIVE suggests that by altering its mentees' behavior, the socioeconomic disadvantages faced by the participants can be improved, if not solved. I would like to extend on this rhetoric he suggests by adding that conservative behaviorists are implying that the community members are the root issue, and therefore place unnecessary pressure on the community to "shape up" and create an underlying statement: "If you become better, the problem will disappear." This is supported by the claims made by STRIVE NextStep DC's program overview document (2014): "STRIVE is based on the premise that these adolescents will succeed only if their educational, health, and psychosocial needs are met through an integrated intervention" (1). The main rehabilitative effort made is addressing the shortcomings of the adolescents instead of determining what the community members and community lack as a unit and identifying a way to partner with this population to create change together. How can we realistically discuss inner-city communities and their members without placing blame and responsibility solely on the population?

The Rhetoric of "Urban Realism"

In contrast to the African American arts renaissance depicted in 20th century urban realism, my self-proposed theory of "urban realism" extends upon West's (2001) rhetoric of the politics of conversion by offering that outsiders to inner-city communities not only examine the surroundings of a community and their impact on the stigma associated with that community, but also to serve as a supporter, not savior, of the residents. In looking at individual families, it is imperative to understand that the environment they originate from plays a factor in how they are viewed socially. If a family resides in a low-income community, I am charging outsiders

(service organizations, District residents that do not reside in inner-city communities, etc.) to look beyond the financial status and living conditions of inner-city community members, and portray the community in an appropriate and realistic manner. By understanding the connotations associated with communities and that the problems that plague them can be inaccurate depictions, a plan can be made to shift the outreach efforts of organizations from educating residents on how to adapt to the situation to learning how to support a community in transforming its reality.

Instead of leading with the disadvantages of the mentees and community members that are served by the program, I believe that the benefits of being part of a service organization should be highlighted first. STRIVE is a program that creates a welcoming, supportive, and comfortable environment, but this reality is not readily conveyed through the program materials. I believe that by displaying the accomplishments of the mentees, highlighting what aspects and contributions they make to the program, and explaining what STRIVE has to offer will move away from placing blame on the mentees as community members and debunk the stereotypes that surround them that are forwarded by their environment. When I let my supervisors know how my first impression of STRIVE NextStep DC contradicted the reality of my exceptional experience mentoring there, they were taken aback about how their organization was being marketed to potential volunteers. I was soon asked to find new ways to address the situation and create a more positive solution. I am still in the process of collaborating with the coordinators at STRIVE, but I have a general idea of how I believe the website and overview documents should look. My proposed rhetoric of "urban realism" encourages service organizations to not forward the rhetoric of tragedy, but instead to extend the rhetoric of politics of conversion in order to portray the inner-city communities that are served appropriately.

In order to ensure that the rhetoric of urban realism I am proposing is clear, I will provide an example of how I am planning to reconstruct the language present in STRIVE NextStep DC's program materials. As I have made clear already, STRIVE NextStep DC utilizes the following phrase in all of the program materials that I have received and evaluated:

> Low-income adolescents with sickle cell disease, an incurable genetic disorder predominantly affecting African Americans and Latinos, are among the most vulnerable youth living in urban areas. STRIVE provides intensive one on one academic tutoring, mentoring, peer support, and disease management education to low-income minority teenagers in Washington, DC living with sickle cell disease. (1)

I have identified how and why this language is inappropriate to use, and now I will provide an alternative that STRIVE NextStep DC can use as it moves forward. In its website, overview documents, and advertisement materials, the following can be utilized to accurately describe the program and realistically discuss the participants:

> STRIVE NextStep DC is a service organization located in the Washington D.C. area that engages adolescents from the Children's National Medical Center Sickle Cell Outpatient Clinic with undergraduate tutors and mentors. George Washington University students are recruited to provide intensive one-on-one academic tutoring, mentoring, peer support, and disease management education for the duration of the mentees' academic school year. In addition to these

activities, the mentors and mentees collaborate on art projects, participate in guest workshops, and culminate the end-of-the-school year with a field trip. If you are interested in joining the STRIVE family and participating in so much more, you can contact our volunteer coordinators below!

The example I provided above not only effectively describes the mission of the organization, but also discusses the mentees more realistically, not tragically. It is important that the words printed in STRIVE NextStep DC's program materials are an accurate depiction of the reality of the program and what occurs during the school year. However, the revisions that I have suggested to STRIVE do not fully encompass what the rhetoric of urban realism is and stands for. The collective overhaul and reconstruction of the rhetoric used by service organizations are only the start to a larger transfiguration that must occur in media outlets, literary works, and other sources. My work in STRIVE NextStep is a great step in the right direction, but more work must be done to ensure that the language used to describe inner city communities and their members in all regions, areas, and organizations present within the United States is befitting.

In analyzing STRIVE NextStep DC, several inappropriate rhetorics that are currently being used have been addressed and dissented, while a new framework has been offered. The rhetoric of tragedy and conservative behaviorism often depict inner-city communities and minority groups as partially realistic, but mainly tragic and destitute. In order to create a more positive outlook and perspective on inner-city communities, we must draw from West's (2001) proposed rhetoric of the politics of conversion and my proposed rhetoric of "urban realism" to move beyond placing blame on inner-city community members only, and examine how a partnership can be formed to create change within the entire community unit. When we can develop a society where all types of service are placed on the same level and concern for the community and root issues increase, practical and real rhetoric can be used to describe and advocate with inner-city communities in a way that does not make the situation a tragedy. In this way, we can portray inner-city communities as strong entities that work with organizations to tackle and fix larger problems, not the members of the community. I charge you to take the initiative within your own neighborhoods, and stand for the use of appropriate rhetoric. We must work together to ensure that the rhetoric used by service organizations to describe those that are served is appropriate and realistic, not tragic and condemning.

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