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JOEL WOLLER, COURTNEY MALONEY, CHARLES CUNNINGHAM¹

ON THE GROUND WITH DAVID DEMAREST:
TOWARD A METHODOLOGY OF SCHOLAR ACTIVISM



For David P. Demarest Jr. (1931-2011), who taught at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh for over thirty years, teaching and research were a form of activism, and activism was another dimension of scholarship and pedagogy. His interdisciplinary work bridged classroom and community, text and image, history and memory, and advocacy and inquiry, thereby providing an exemplary model of integrated educator-scholar-activist practice. His interests ranged from literature to landscape, from preservation to interpretation, from photography to murals, and from the Carnegie Library to the Croatian Catholic Church. As a community and political activist, he focused most often on fighting racial injustice, resisting war, and preserving crucial sites of working-class history and life. Best known outside of Pittsburgh for spearheading the republishing of Thomas Bell's classic novel of industrial working-class immigrant experience, *Out of This Furnace*, he strove to foster public participation in dialogues about working-class experience and the meaning of place, just as his teaching took students off-campus and into "the field."

Each of the present authors studied "on the ground" with our friend and mentor Dave Demarest while we were graduate students at Carnegie Mellon University during the 1990s.² In this essay, we will offer a sketch of Dave's practice in Pittsburgh. We will then argue that from that practice we can discern a set of methodological principles useful to like-minded scholar-activists.

The Man and his Practice

With his wife Marlene and family, Demarest moved to Pittsburgh in 1964, when he began teaching at Carnegie Tech, soon to become Carnegie Mellon University (CMU). An admirer of Jonathan Swift, he was hired to teach composition and British literature.³ His embrace of Pittsburgh did not come immediately; in fact, he told a reporter in 1974: “I hated this city at first.” But a sabbatical with his family in the eminently “global” city of London opened his eyes to new ways of seeing in “local” Pittsburgh. He recalled:

I started to realize that I would have to get out on foot and really look at where I was living—really get to know the city. After all, literature is about life itself—and our lives are here in the city. (Carlin 7)

In that era, he began walking all over Pittsburgh, the surrounding mill towns, and in rural industrial areas such as the southwestern Pennsylvania coke country—often accompanied by his good friend, historian and photographer Gene Levy.

At the same time, Dave and Marlene initiated a lifelong engagement with Pittsburgh’s African American community. They lived in a racially mixed border neighborhood between white and black Pittsburgh, North Point Breeze, and despite the fact that Carnegie Mellon was predominantly white, Demarest established a pedagogical relationship with African American students in the city that was formative for him. In 1967-68, he taught language arts to young, African American adult students training to become paraprofessional mental health care workers. The next year, he taught black high school seniors at CMU through the Brushton Inner-city Encouragement Program (Project Upward Bound). His reflections on the differences between teaching these students and the “kids who have never stepped off the conveyor belt of our education system” demonstrated, among other things, his commitments to anti-racism, teaching for liberation, and learning from students. “My experience suggests,” he reflected, “that the most important thing about nonstandard adult writers may not be that they’re nonstandard, but that they want to write and have something to say. If that is the case, a composition course should free them to write” (“Freedom to Write” 315).

That he valued those voices is evident in an anthology Demarest co-edited with Lois S. Lamdin in 1970. *The Ghetto Reader* is a collection of short works and excerpts in which writers describe their experiences of living in ghettos. The selections in the anthology cross race and ethnic lines and question the boundaries between professional and nonprofessional authorship. Alongside writers such as James Baldwin, Michael Gold, Langston Hughes, Alfred Kazin, Grace Paley, Richard Wright, and Malcolm X are several student compositions that had been contributions to a militant, small-circulation paper in Pittsburgh. Originally conceived as a text for the inner-city African American mental health workers, the editors soon realized the value of *The Ghetto Reader* for whites, whose “simple ignorance of ghetto life determines the gamut of white middle-class race reactions” (ix).

With the rise of cultural studies in the CMU English Department, Demarest further tried to bridge class and race divides by exposing his typically middle-class students to non-traditional approaches to literature and culture that focused less on literary periods and more on his interest in working people, place, and history. He designed and taught courses such as “Reading the Built Landscape,” “Documenting the Visual,” and “Representing Pittsburgh,” mostly to

undergraduates. These classes were always interdisciplinary and collaborative; “Documenting the Visual” in particular was team taught with photographer Charlee Brodsky. That class, fueled by Demarest’s own passion for photography, allowed students to conceive of documentary broadly and to think critically about photographs even while embracing their aesthetic beauty. Representing Pittsburgh exposed students to the myriad ways the region has been imagined and recorded in literature, art, and various documentary modes. “Reading the Built Landscape” saw the city and its environs as a text and made students think about the political stakes inherent in the ways cities are constructed. Dave started including students on the walks he and Levy were taking across industrial Pittsburgh, giving them the opportunity to climb slag heaps, take in the view from the Monongahela Cemetery, and witness the production of steel at the Edgar Thompson Works in Braddock. Other trips involved exploring the historic ethnic neighborhoods that distinguish Pittsburgh or rambling through coal country to see the old company towns or to discover the grown-over ruins of beehive coke ovens. This kind of experiential pedagogy invited students to understand the stories of the people they read about in ways not possible on campus.



Nonetheless, Demarest found campus a productive location for progressive projects. Most prominently, he edited the faculty/staff newspaper *Focus* for over twenty years. By inviting blue-collar staff to contribute regularly, he gave the paper an inclusive and critical voice, and thus made clear that the university depended on all kinds of work. He was also involved in the solidarity movement People for Workers’ Rights, which spearheaded living wage and anti-sweatshop organizing on campus and which succeeded in pressuring Carnegie Mellon to adopt a Workplace Code of Conduct. He was a consistent supporter of student antiwar protests during the Vietnam War, and he was a critic of CMU’s participation in military weapons design. His pursuit of racial justice included helping to found the Campus Coalition for Peace and Justice, which was organized in 1995 to demand the conviction of police who had killed an unarmed African American man, Jonny Gammage, and to end police brutality in general. In the same period, he was active in the campaign to win a new trial for Pennsylvania death row inmate Mumia Abu Jamal. In fact, he regularly visited the journalist in prison, which led Dave to become an active member of the Pennsylvania Prison Society, through which he also befriended less well-known prisoners. This kind of engagement folded back into the classroom when Demarest brought activists like Julia Wright, Pam Africa, Robert Meeropol, and Leonard Weinglass to campus to speak about race, justice, and imprisonment. Without pressuring them, he invited students to join the cause.

As a writer and editor, Demarest was active beyond his work on *Focus*. *Out of This Furnace* has become a staple on American history and ethnic and working-class literature syllabi since he championed its reissue in 1976. His “Afterword” to the republished edition arguably remains the best scholarship on the novel. In a similar vein, he wrote an interpretative afterword to the 1979 reissue of journalist Arthur Burgoyne’s long out-of-print *The Homestead Strike of 1892* (1893), a key primary source for understanding that watershed event. Characteristically, Dave prioritized republishing neglected books over writing new ones and preferred modest postscripts to imposing introductions.

The same ethic informs *From These Hills, From These Valleys: Selected Fiction About Western Pennsylvania* (1976), a collection he edited that has the impact of narrative history, with each selection grounded in a specific place and time. The volume’s placement of vintage photographs and drawings among the fictional pieces demonstrates Demarest’s increasing interest in the meanings produced when text and image are combined. He took that interest further with the anthology *The River Ran Red: Homestead 1892* (1992), a collective project for which he served as general editor. A companion volume to the public television documentary *The River Ran Red* (1993) produced by Steffi Domike and Nicole Fauteux, the anthology is a definitive documentary history of the events, contexts, and legacies of the Homestead lockout and strike. It integrates a wide range of primary sources—including press accounts, poetry, photographs, and drawings—with eighteen short sidebar essays, an introduction by Demarest, and an afterword by labor historian David Montgomery.

Another of Demarest’s collaborative editing projects is now in its fourth decade: in the early 1970s, Demarest and CMU graduate student Anthony Spataro began compiling an annotated bibliography of literature about Western Pennsylvania. Now grown to over 2,000 entries, the project has been continued by Peter Oresick under the working title *A Reader’s Guide to Western Pennsylvania in Fiction and Drama, 1792-2014*. A cooperative spirit is also evident even in his publications that do not feature a shared by-line, such as “Slang and Profanity: Their Uses in English Composition” and “Freedom to Write.” In the latter essay, Demarest quotes students so extensively—their voices account for a third of the text or more—that they function as a kind of collective co-author.

A collaborative approach is also manifest in the dramatic reading *Voices of the Great Strike*, which Dave assembled to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the 1919 Steel Strike. In it, the voices of the past—Mother Jones, William Z. Foster, Fannie Sellins, Father Kazincy, Mary Heaton Vorse, and others—come to life. Demarest drew on these figures’ autobiographies and letters; contemporary accounts such as the Interchurch World Movement’s report on the strike, local newspapers, and the industry publication *Iron Age*; literary interpretations such as William Attaway’s novel *Blood on the Forge* (1941); labor histories such as Dennis Dickerson’s *Out of the Crucible* (1986); and a personal interview he conducted in 1977 with Annie Morgan, the wife of an African American steelworker who came north to work in the mills just prior to the strike. In bringing together these various sources, Demarest created a documentary collage that gives voice to the people involved, while at the same time putting the events in historical context. The reading was co-produced and performed by founding members of the agitprop theater group Iron Clad Agreement at the Braddock Carnegie Library in September of 1994.

The fact that the reading was performed in Braddock, at the library and free of charge, relates to another aspect of Demarest’s pedagogical activism: his work helping to preserve places that are

historically significant and irreplaceable, which then become sites of memory, community education, organization, and culture. He was active in the group that helped save the Braddock library—the first Carnegie library in the U.S.—when it was scheduled for demolition in the 1970s. For decades after, he served on the board of the organization that took responsibility for the library, the Braddock’s Field Historical Society, and he edited its bimonthly newsletter. His constant advocacy helped raise funds to keep the library open and reclaim the building from deterioration, room by room. It is significant that by the 1970s, Braddock had become an economically depressed, predominantly African American community. Demarest’s involvement in the struggle to save and revitalize the library exemplifies his enduring practice of cross-race solidarity. Providing a music hall, art studios, athletic facilities, and a variety of activities, the library has become a civic center for the struggling mill town.

In a similar vein, Demarest also worked to preserve the Maxo Vanka murals in St. Nicholas Croatian Church in Millvale, Pennsylvania. His pedagogical walks through the industrial landscape often ended at St. Nicholas, where Vanka’s paintings juxtapose themes of class conflict and war with Catholic iconography and the distinctive character of the working-class Croatian parishioners. The murals were commissioned by Father Albert Zagar in 1937, and they were completed after a second visit by the artist in 1941. According to art historian Barbara McCloskey, the murals integrate traditional elements of Byzantine church decoration and Croatian folk art with a modern vocabulary drawn from Mexican muralism, European symbolism, and surrealism.⁴ Demarest’s efforts to preserve the murals included writing the dramatic reading *Gift to America*. Based on oral histories from the congregation and pastor, as well as on interviews with Vanka’s widow and daughter, the site-specific play puts the artworks in historical context and tells the compelling story of their creation through a dialogue between Vanka and Father Zagar. *Gift to America* was first performed in 1981, also by the Iron Clad Agreement, and it has contributed significantly to interpreting and promoting the murals.

In yet another instance of place-based activism, Dave was instrumental in preventing the demolition of the last building on the former Homestead Steel Works site, the Pump House, which was the location of the infamous Battle of Homestead during the 1892 lockout and strike.⁵ Demarest was a leading figure in the coalition that evolved into the Battle of Homestead Foundation (BHF), a volunteer, non-profit organization that has earned support from the United Steel Workers and other unions. Through the BHF, the Pump House was not only preserved, but it has become a public forum. BHF events, which are free of charge, address a wide variety of social, economic, political, and cultural issues—past and present, local and beyond – through talks, movie screenings, performances, and exhibits.⁶

The BHF fosters labor and community solidarity by inviting critical dialogue; its mission is to “both memorialize the tragic events of 1892 and to focus on the consequences that remain with us yet today.” This reflects a dialectical impulse underlying Demarest’s pedagogy generally. Past and present, global and local interpenetrate in his many projects. His avid engagement in the local as a point of investigation and action connects the specific to the general in matters of broad import. This is stated explicitly in his and Lamdin’s preface to *The Ghetto Reader*, in which they identify the “active localism” of the black power movement as its most significant quality, and explain their choice to include much material from Pittsburgh by asserting that “the phenomena of black pride and black art, and the political thrust of the black ghetto all originate and exist at a local level” (xiii).

One can see this dialectical principle woven throughout the projects outlined above: Demarest describes *Out of This Furnace* as “a record and memory album of a people, a place, and an era” (“Three Steeltown Novels” 77). Yet Bell’s novel, so meticulously grounded, tells a much broader story of immigrant working-class experience in the United States and of the rise of the labor movement. Similarly, the 1919 Steel Strike commemoration in Braddock implicitly linked that event to a continuing resistance against the economic evisceration of post-industrial communities everywhere. The Braddock Library is the heart of a struggling, provincial, depopulated town, yet it seeks global connections. For instance, its ceramics studio—located in the building’s basement, once a bathhouse for mill workers

– produces low-cost water filters for use in the global south (and also provides workshops to propagate knowledge of the technique).⁷ The Braddock Library is now both a community center and an official National Historic Landmark. Maxo Vanka’s murals are increasingly recognized as having international, not just regional, value. For Demarest, the global, the universal, the extraordinary—these are not far away, or not only far away. They are also right here, on the ground where we stand: “Life isn’t abstract or concerned with far-off or romantic times,” he said, “but actually lived right here, in Pittsburgh” (Carlin 7).

Discerning a Methodological Approach

So far we have argued that Demarest was an exemplary scholar-activist whose teaching and research were integrated with activist interventions in “the world.” Now we will show that Dave’s legacy is available to people whose identities, interests, talents and opportunities may be very different from his. We hope to contribute to an evolving methodological *approach* to scholar-activism, rather than to propose a fixed, rigid *method*.

Demarest can best be understood in the “popular education” tradition of Paulo Freire and Myles Horton, among others.⁸ He wanted to engender in the working class—broadly conceived but always with attention to the local identities comprising it—an inspiring yet accurate appreciation of its own powers and capabilities. This is a humanistic mission to be sure, but it is also potentially radical: to the extent that the vast majority of people understand their collective capacities, fundamental change may be possible. To this end, Demarest’s approach to scholar-activist pedagogy included these elements:

- Using literary study to teach the social totality;
- Practicing interdisciplinarity;
- Taking a proletarian pedestrian perspective;
- Engaging the aesthetic dimension;
- Fostering collective, cooperative work;
- Building and sustaining popular education institutions.

Using literary study to teach the social totality. Although he was trained in the period when the canon was dominated by white men, Demarest was an early teacher of the literature of the marginalized— by class, race, and gender, in particular. If, as he said, “literature is about life

itself,” *life* means everyone’s, not just those of a sanctioned few. No society—and thus no individual life—can be understood without analyzing the totality of social relations. To make this point, Dave liked to juxtapose and teach texts that presented different perspectives on the same place, time, or theme. For example, in his course on Pittsburgh, he would teach, consecutively, *Out of This Furnace*, a “white” working-class immigrant story; John Edgar Wideman’s *Sent For You Yesterday*, a novel of working-class African Americans in Pittsburgh’s Homewood neighborhood; and Annie Dillard’s memoir, *An American Childhood*, about growing up in a white, middle-class section of Point Breeze (which is contiguous with Homewood). All depict sometimes drastically different experiences lived within blocks of one another. If Dillard unwittingly chooses a title that would obscure those differences, teaching these books together calls into question a homogenous—and implicitly normative—notion of what “life” and place is.

Without rejecting the traditional literary canon, Demarest nonetheless complicated the notion that its texts capture universal human experience. For example, Bell’s description of Braddock in *Out of This Furnace* contrasts strikingly with the “wasteland” image of working-class life suggested by T. S. Eliot and typified by the contemptuous description of the people of the “valley of ashes” in *The Great Gatsby*. Dave often highlighted a passage from *Out of This Furnace* in which Mary, whose steelworker husband Mike has been killed in the mill, looks at a fancy Pullman car that has stopped on the tracks right at her doorstep.

She sat up in bed and raised the shade. A passenger train’s bright-windowed cars were halted before the house. It was an express train for she could see the towels on the seats which identified Pullman cars for her, and one car was a diner. A white-jacketed porter was leaning out of a door and people at tables were peering into what must have seemed to them a dismal and impenetrable darkness...

Cold air was drenching her, and she lowered the window, coughing. She kept coughing, deep wracking convulsions that shook her, shook the bed, threw her clawing helplessly against the wall. (234)⁹

Dave would note Bell’s juxtaposition of rich and poor as an implicit commentary on injustice in the U.S.: while Mary will soon die of tuberculosis incubated in the smothering industrial air, the elite merely pass through the places where their wealth is built, incapable of seeing the people who build it. Far from wastelands, these places become the crucible—to use Bell’s metaphor—out of which a class capable of making a more just society emerges.¹⁰ In pointing out to his students that there *is* a social order in the U.S., and that it is complex and often unjust, Demarest joined the traditionally humanist promise of literary studies with a radical social analysis.

Practicing interdisciplinarity. Dave loved literature, but he also drew from and taught cultural studies, social history, theatre arts, photography, urban studies, and news writing and reporting. He recognized, as well, the need to understand industrial processes such as steelmaking, coal mining, and manufacturing. This interdisciplinary impulse places him in a vital tradition: From Marx to Du Bois to Women’s Studies and beyond, scholar-activism has seldom if ever been bound by academic disciplines such as literary criticism.

A prominent example of his commitment to interdisciplinarity was an impulse to explore genre and media. He supplemented his writing in academic genres with non-standard or creative ones, such as *Gift to America* and *Voices of the Great Strike*. He encouraged students to explore genre as well; for instance, he invited his adult, African American Language Skills students to write their weekly papers “in the form that felt most comfortable to them” (“Freedom to Write” 314). Demarest was also a longtime board member, and sometimes president, of Mon Valley Media (MVM), a volunteer, nonprofit organization dedicated to documenting the culture and history of women, people of color, and working-class people in Western Pennsylvania. Among other projects, MVM produced the video *Women of Steel*, an oral history of women steelworkers.¹¹

Taking a proletarian pedestrian perspective. Demarest’s preferred method for taking a bottom-up point of view was *walking*, which he described as “a seeing device” (Carlin 7). The material world around us, the built environment, he insists, is a text. His peripatetic pedagogy grew out of his sabbatical in London in the early 1970s. Swift was, in Demarest’s phrase, “a madman walker.” Likewise, he observed, “the London of Dickens is viewed from the sidewalk—not a carriage” (Carlin 7). Soon Dave applied these insights to Pittsburgh. What is particularly characteristic of his approach is evident in the video *Out of This Furnace: A Walking Tour of Thomas Bell’s Novel*, which, it is important to note, is not a hike through the *town* of Braddock, but instead through Bell’s *novel*. Demarest read literature and landscape together, as intertwined strands of an all-encompassing social text.¹²

Demarest’s approach literalizes the metaphor that guides the practice of scholar-activists such as E.P. Thompson, who have challenged “winner’s history” by writing, as they put it, “from below.” For Thompson, a social and labor historian, this meant taking the perspective of workers (although others have done likewise from the point of view of women, the colonized, and comparable subaltern groups).¹³ This is a way of seeing defined in part by what it is *not*: the perspective of the carriage, the automobile, or the surveyor. In this sense, it is a critical perspective.

Erin Tocknell, who took Demarest’s *Reading the Built Landscape* as an undergraduate at CMU, succinctly and vividly captures the essence of Demarest’s proletarian pedestrianism in her reflective essay “Rowing Through the Ruins.” Her thesis is that she “learned about sight” from below, at river level, as a member of the college rowing team (19). Demarest is at the center of her narrative: “I thought I had seen Pittsburgh,” she writes.

Not so, Demarest said: you have never really seen this place until you learn that Pittsburgh has grown from its rivers and the work they have supported. Then you will realize that it is all layers and the some of the layers peek through the others like sheets beneath a frayed blanket. (20)

Notice that Demarest emphasizes seeing as a proletarian, focusing on how the landscape has been “worked” by people. Looking from below, whether from the ground or from the surface of the water at the bottom of a river valley, is a means toward this end. Usually, however, this means seeing as an engaged *pedestrian*.

Engaging the aesthetic. For Demarest, a critical standpoint tends to be embodied in an experience of beauty, whether walking, rowing, or sitting in a St. Nicholas Church pew.¹⁴ For instance, the rusty detritus of industrial society, the sublimity of blight, fascinated him.¹⁵ An anecdote illustrates Demarest’s aesthetic sensibility: in the mid-1990s, Dave and a small group

were exploring a slagheap on the north side of the Monongahela River, just across from where US Steel's Homestead Works had stood. A residential development now occupies the ground Demarest and his group walked that day, and a gigantic mall has claimed the site of the mill. Standing in what was then barren moonscape, on which only the hardiest weeds could survive, and looking down on the desolate brownfield of the former mill and future mall, Demarest turned to the group, beaming. Gesturing with a sweep of his hand, and speaking in his distinctive, gravelly voice, he said: "This is Shangri-La."

Demarest's aesthetic imagination was deeply humanistic yet animated by social and political concerns. An essay by Demarest and Levy about an abandoned zinc plant in Western Pennsylvania exemplifies this disposition:

Much of the appeal of the site, for us, was aesthetic. We were struck by the beauty of the brick, whether strewn about or in a rubble of many colors, or still set carefully in structures. Brick, an ancient building material, was the architectural staple of the industrial era. Brick is human sized, laid by individual workers. It suggests skill and craftsmanship. Even as we began to "read" the meaning of the furnace ruins, the statement made by the architecture stayed vividly in mind: Here was a technology intimately dependent on the activity of human workers. (133)

Most striking here is the way Demarest and Levy move from embracing the romantic attractiveness of the ruins to an emphasis on the creativity and power of workers, the people who made these moments of aesthetic appreciation possible; to minimize the aesthetic experience in favor of "politics" would therefore demean the workers. At the same time, for Dave and Gene, beholding beauty is a way of apprehending social and historical forces, a likely motivation for activism—not an end in itself.

Fostering collective, cooperative work. Demarest's essay with Levy is typical of his scholar-activism in that it is collaborative, as is editing, his greatest talent. The long hours he dedicated to it were motivated most by his enthusiasm for helping others find their voice. As editor of the Braddock Library newsletter, for instance, he published everyone from local schoolchildren to eminent scholars such as University of Liverpool geographer Paul Laxton. The pride he took in this work is especially evident in his reflections on his 22-year tenure at *Focus*. Emphasizing the paper's penchant for engaging contentious issues, from Palestinian rights to local campus concerns, Demarest pointed out that

Minority rights, feminism, the gay movement showed up often in *FOCUS* pages. In a prize-winning piece, later republished nationally, Kristin Kovacic wrote about her father, the fired CMU electrician. In the early '90s, Tom Kelly started writing "Shop Talk," which quickly became *FOCUS*'s most-read feature—reporting on how the university looks to one of its union craftspeople. ("Amen Corner" 3)¹⁶

For Demarest, collaboration with inexperienced writers engaging with controversial issues meant shared risk-taking. At the same time, Demarest had a clear understanding that shared risks are not necessarily shared equally:

What was clear to me from the start, however, is that as a tenured faculty member I had a certain right to freedom of speech. As editor I could extend that right to faculty and staff who wanted to speak their minds—or who just wanted to write. (“Amen Corner” 3)

He thus worked as a behind-the-scenes public intellectual, one who fostered the expression of a range of less privileged voices.

The River Ran Red: Homestead 1892 is a somewhat different kind of collaboration. The book had eight co-editors—including filmmakers, a photographer, a labor journalist, and academics—along with coordinating editor Fannia Weingartner. Steffi Domike remembers the collective production of the anthology:

We hired Fannia to herd us cats and Dave was selected as the general editor, a job he took very seriously. He mentored all of us, and we each got assignments. We had a retreat up in Uniontown or Nemaquin, where we laid out all of the possible texts on different tables according to what eventually became the chapters of the book. I remember being assigned to read all of the [primary sources] on one table and make a proposal for what should be included. Our goal was to provide a venue for the voices from the past to come through. All of the texts are from the period except the intro, the afterward and the essays in each chapter, [which were] authored by different members of the gang.

These efforts reveal a cooperative approach to history that is shown not only in how Demarest worked with people, but in his very conception of historical research. Instead of mining artifacts from the past to break open their secrets, Dave engaged in what one might see as collaboration with the dead. In this approach, the scholar’s role is to host a conversation in which those inhabiting the past and those acting in the present can potentially ally with, and be resources for, each other: the living protect the memory of their predecessors and fan the sparks of hope ignited in the past, just as the voices of the past inspire, provoke, and perhaps instruct their descendants.¹⁷ *Building and sustaining popular education institutions*. Demarest’s work as editor of *Focus* exemplifies his dedication to creating educational opportunities outside the classroom and linking them with activist concerns. Equally striking is the extent to which Demarest devoted himself to organizing and sustaining off-campus grassroots *popular education* organizations such as the Braddock Library, the Society to Preserve the Millvale Murals of Maxo Vanka, and the Battle of Homestead Foundation. Consider: In addition to presenting roughly 10-15 public programs each year and occasional, long formal meetings, the BHF “Pump House Gang” holds weekly informal breakfast sessions. Dave rarely missed any of them. Furthermore, he took a leading role whenever needed; for instance, he was instrumental both in negotiating the Battle of Homestead Foundation’s access to the Pump House, which is owned by Steel Industry Heritage Corporation, and in designing the brass historical marker at that site. Likewise, he took the lead in programming speakers and other events at the Pump House; in particular, he was responsible for the annual “Poetry at the Pump House” series, which included photography, architecture, and other arts as well as literature. He also spent a lot of time composing press releases, designing fliers, copy editing the newsletter, researching interpretative material, writing fundraising proposals, and doing any number of mundane but crucial tasks. And Demarest was doing the same, more or less, for several other organizations. His willingness to

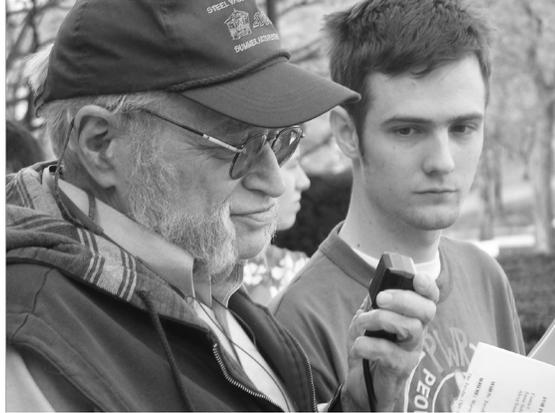
work as an almost anonymous on-the-ground organizer is not only remarkable, but it exemplifies what is necessary to build grass roots educational institutions.

On the continuum of public intellectual practice, Demarest's approach would seem to contrast with another, in which the intellectual is less an organizer of local grassroots institutions than an apparently unaffiliated theorist, spokesperson, or sometimes even symbol of a movement—a tendency perhaps epitomized by Noam Chomsky. Taking nothing away from other approaches to scholar-activism, we want to suggest that Demarest's tends to be underappreciated. True, popular education projects such as the ones Dave helped build cannot be entirely independent of the state, commercial media, big philanthropy, or the academy. However, in a public sphere largely occupied by hegemonic values, such popular education institutions may obtain a foothold and develop into spaces for dissent and, potentially, resistance.

The fact that each of these institutions continues to thrive is a tribute to Dave's living legacy. The Braddock Library endures as a local community center. *Gift to America* continues to feature prominently in fundraising for the restoration of Vanka's masterpiece. The Battle of Homestead Foundation has grown and garnered international attention. In 2012, it earned the praise of the UK-based *Guardian* newspaper: "The steel mills are now shopping malls; but we remain workers, rather than only consumers. The Pump House Gang reminds us of that. We could do with a few British equivalents." Demarest's legacy thus goes well beyond the bricks-and-mortar of the landmarks he helped preserve—it lives on in the everyday practice of the people who continue to inhabit and vitalize those places.¹⁸

Demarest's students and others who encountered him in myriad settings are carrying on his legacy in ways that may be impossible to inventory. At a memorial celebration of his life held at the Braddock Library in 2011, even his friends were astonished by the range of his activities. Many were scholar-activists working outside of academe, and some seemed to be only vaguely aware that he was a professor.

Reflecting on his modest, easygoing demeanor, neighborhood activist Cheryl Hall remarked, "He didn't *look* busy." Dave was, of course, extraordinarily busy and dedicated. But he did not see himself as a heroic figure, and contemplating his pursuits should not make us aspire to be heroes ourselves, regardless of our point of action. For instance, in an era in which the majority of college teachers are not tenured, and five courses per semester is not an unusual load, his example is unlikely to serve as a ready-made model for many academic scholar-activists today. Instead, as we have demonstrated, his life's work offers a coherent set of methodological approaches that can be abstracted, shared, and then adapted to various local and institutional conditions. However we might apply these insights, Demarest's practice shows that in paying attention to the ground we stand on, we find a holistic, critical, yet compassionate way of seeing and acting in the world.



Notes

¹ This is a collaborative project with three “primary” and no “secondary” contributors. We thank Victor Cohen, Nick Coles, Liz Demarest, Vicki Demarest, Steffi Domike, Patricia Dunmire, Nicole Fauteux, Page Thomas, and especially Marlene Demarest for their help in conceiving, researching, and writing this essay. Additionally, we thank everyone who participated in our presentation and discussion of this material at the 2013 Working Class Studies Association conference in Madison, Wisconsin.

² Because of our personal relationship to “Dave,” we will occasionally depart from academic convention and refer to him by his first name.

³ Demarest earned his Ph.D. in English from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1963. His dissertation is titled *Legal Language and Situation in the 18th Century Novel: Readings in Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, and Austen*.

⁴ McCloskey goes on to assert the murals represent a valuable and as yet under-studied example of eastern European Modernism. Further, this combination of traditional and modern elements “set the tone for the central thematic concern of his murals, namely the relationship between the old and the new, and between enduring values and the human cost of accelerated change.”

⁵ When the Carnegie Steel Company sent Pinkerton guards to break the steelworkers’ union, workers and townspeople defended their jobs and community with force on July 6 1892. Despite this expression of solidarity, workers lost the Homestead lockout and strike. This defeat dramatized both the loss of union power in late 19th century and the need for a revitalized and *industrial* labor movement.

⁶ The Foundation has also been involved in projects beyond events at the Pump House. For example, it co-sponsored the Working-Class Studies Association annual convention in 2009, co-sponsored conferences with the Pennsylvania Labor History Society, and published an annotated and indexed book on the history of Pittsburgh: Charles McCollester, *The Point of Pittsburgh: Production and Struggle at the Forks of the Ohio* (Pittsburgh: Battle of Homestead Foundation, 2008). Furthermore, its email list and informal weekly breakfast meetings have provided a network for publicizing, and sometimes organizing, demonstrations and other actions in Pittsburgh.

An example of the Battle of Homestead Foundation's recent activities outside the Pump House is its co-sponsorship of the book launch for Staughton Lynd's *Doing History from the Bottom Up: On E.P. Thompson, Howard Zinn, and Rebuilding the Labor Movement from Movement from Below* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2014). This event was covered on C-SPAN: <http://www.c-span.org/video/?323296-1/book-discussion-history-bottom>

⁷ See "Braddock Library Ceramic Water Filter Project," <http://www.angelfire.com/planet/braddockarts/water.html>, and Diana Nelson, "Braddock Shop Helps Clean Third World Countries' Water: Mini-factory turning out ceramic cones that filter bacteria," February 8, 2009: <http://www.post-gazette.com/news/world/2009/02/08/Braddock-shop-helps-clean-Third-World-countries-water/stories/200902080132>

⁸ See Popular Education News <http://www.popednews.org/index.html> for an excellent introduction to this tradition. For further reading, see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998) and his 1968 classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1990); Myles Horton, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1990) and *The Myles Horton Reader: Education for Social Change* (Dale Jacobs, ed. Knoxville: U of Tennessee Press, 2003); and Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (Brenda Bell, John Gaventa, and John Peters, eds. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1990).

⁹ Fitzgerald's "valley of ashes" description below seems to sanction the unsympathetic inverse gaze that Bell's narrator imagines in the Pullman car passage:

This valley of ashes takes the form of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of grey cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak and comes to rest, and immediately the ashgrey men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud which screens their obscure operations from your sight...The valley of ashes is bounded on one side by a foul river, and when the drawbridge is up to let the barges through, the passengers on waiting trains can stare at the dismal scene for as long as half an hour. (27-28)

In this privileged text of the period, the people, and the man-made landscape they are forced to inhabit, are reduced to mere symbols for the elite – a geographic "wasteland" rendered as the objective correlative of a supposedly more significant existential one.

¹⁰ Demarest quotes this passage in "Representations of Women in Narratives About the Great Steel Strike of 1919," an essay that exemplifies the teaching method we are describing. In it, he juxtaposes the varying, and sometimes at odds, representations of working-class women in texts by Bell, Willa Cather, Mary Heaton Vorse, William Attaway, and John Dos Passos.

¹¹ Likewise, MVM served as the fiscal agent for projects such as Camilla Griggers's *Memories of a Forgotten War* (2002), a documentary about the U.S. invasion of the Philippines, and Curtis Reaves's documentary video *John and Sarah: A Family's Journey to Freedom* (1998), which then evolved into a multi-media installation *Elders: An African-American Oral History*.

¹² *Out of This Furnace: A Walking Tour of Thomas Bell's Novel*. Steffi Domike, with Sheila Maniar, Lenni Todd, and David Saz, prod. Mon Valley Media, 1990. Video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8hNBZ6DXv4&feature=youtu.be> We use the phrase “social text” in the sense elaborated by Gayatri Spivak in “Reading the World: Literary Studies in the Eighties.” See especially pages 95, 98, and 102. (*In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1988. 95-102. Print.)

¹³ See E.P. Thompson's 1966 essay “History from Below” (*The Essential Thompson*, Dorothy Thompson, ed., New York: New Press, 2001).

¹⁴ Demarest's approach both supplements and challenges methodologies that define critical perspective in terms of an abstract subaltern cognitive standpoint. See Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971) and Sandra Harding, ed., *The Feminist Standpoint Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁵ Demarest's office at CMU was legendary for his messy collection of posters, odd items picked up on his walks, and other “junk,” mostly from industrial sites. Comprising an apt memorial, some of this material has been preserved in Baker Hall as the “Dave Demarest Medals.”

¹⁶ Kristin Kovacic's 1990 narrative essay “Proud to Work for the University” has been reprinted in *What We Hold in Common: An Introduction to Working-Class Studies* (Janet Zandy, ed. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2001. 12-16).

¹⁷ For this description of Demarest's approach we are indebted to Benjamin's sixth thesis on the concept of history. See Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>

¹⁸ See <http://www.braddockcarnegielibrary.org/>, <http://www.vankamurals.org/>, <http://battleofhomestead.org/>

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Photo Credits

1. Dave Demarest among industrial ruins. Photo probably by Gene Levy, c. 1990s. Courtesy of the Demarest family.

2. Demarest at the gravesite of Thomas Bell's father Michael Belejck, with a group of students from the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon, on one of his famous walking tours of Braddock PA. Photo probably by Sue Wrbican, c. 1985. Courtesy of Nicholas Coles.

3. Demarest and Matt Toups at a campus rally organized by People for Workers Rights. Photo by Daniel Papasian, 2004. Courtesy of Pittsburgh Indy Media.

Joel Woller is Assistant Professor of History at Carlow University in Pittsburgh, and has long been active in the Battle of Homestead Foundation. His publications include: "'Only in Exceptional Cases:' The Steel Workers Organizing Committee Remembers the Homestead Strike," *Mediations* 23(2), Spring 1998.

Courtney Maloney is Associate Professor of Writing & Humanities at the Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design. She received her doctorate in Literary and Cultural Studies from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, where she studied with Dave Demarest alongside Joel Woller and Charles Cunningham. Her research has focused on the representation and self-representation of working-class people in photography, and explored the ways that photography and corporate publicity have impacted our collective understanding of organized labor. She is interested in "place" as a framework for investigating the intersections of culture, politics, and experience.

Charles Cunningham is Associate Professor of English Language and Literature at East Michigan State University. His recent articles include: "'A War Once Started': Feminism, Marxism, and the Dialectics of Destruction" in *Works & Days*; "The Dialectics of Hope: Marxism and Method in The Cultural Front" in *Reconstruction* and "Rethinking the Politics of The Grapes of Wrath" in *Cultural Logic*.



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