
Presidential Address

BECOMING A SUPERHERO: ON TRADING THE COMFORTS OF
BELONGING FOR THE OBSCURITY OF OUTSIDER-NESS

Stacy Otto
Illinois State University

The remarkable photograph (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jul/11/baton-rouge-protester-photo-iesha-evans>)¹ from the Black Lives Matter movement taken at a protest in response to the police killing of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge went viral as soon as it hit the Reuters feed. In it Ieshia Evans meets storm-trooper-get-up-clad² policemen encased in every imaginable piece of riot and military gear with nothing more than her ethereal composure, billowing summer gown, and quest for justice. Despite the tremendous visual weight of what is actually only two heavily adorned officers, but reads like many more, Evans' steely presence appears to emanate some unseen force so powerful the officers have lost what should be secure footing, are instead being blown backward toward their comrades, a long line of identical storm troopers poised for battle. Even more remarkable—and the reason I have stared endlessly at this photograph, indeed take it as my touchstone for this address today—Ieshia Evans is perfectly composed, steadfastly nonviolent, upright of carriage, perfect of posture, impervious to intimidation. Perhaps the image's most unsettling quality and the source of its magic, she seems to be levitating. On social media, public reaction was sure and swift: “she look[s] like a superhero.”³

The superhero has long functioned as a cultural mythic, a visual trope designed to fill a psychological need in which an individual is seen as

¹ The photograph taken by Jonathan Bachman, Reuters, can be seen in Mazin Sidahmed, “‘She was making her stand’: Image of Baton Rouge Protester an Instant Classic,” *The Guardian*, July 11, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jul/11/baton-rouge-protester-photo-iesha-evans>. This was the first protest the New Orleans-based photographer ever covered. The remarkable power of this image was also documented by Yoni Appelbaum, “A Single Photo from Baton Rouge That’s Hard to Forget,” *The Atlantic*, July 10, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2016/07/a-single-photo-that-captures-race-and-policing-in-america/490664/>; and in Teju Cole’s *New York Times Magazine* piece, cited fully in the next note.

² Teju Cole, “The Superhero Photographs of the Black Lives Matter Movement: On Photography,” *The New York Times Magazine*, July 26, 2016, <http://nyti.ms/2ads3WI>.

³ I was inspired to the term “superhero” used in conjunction with a member of a social movement by Teju Cole.

“confronting terrible power.”⁴ Loner, outsider, outcast, the superhero⁵ may have kept secret his or her superpower before calling upon it to save the world. Superheroes are brave, commit selfless acts, fight corruption, do not allow bullies or despots to terrorize their cities, are unafraid to stand alone. Superheroes are made extraordinary not as much by their superpowers as by their dedication to protect the innocent from being crushed by the power-mad fascist, secret plot to ruin the world, or the evil rich. In an unjust world in which social causes must be promoted, in a world where some must rise to “fight the good fight,” it is the superheroes among us who take the opposition unawares, who use their outsider-ness combined with their superpower—inspiring empathy—to connect to other individuals, turn history, and rewrite how, moving forward, we will be as a people.

The miraculously captured superhero image situated within a social movement, though, both reinforces the trope and moves beyond it to capture, by inspiring deep empathy, the public within the cause, to shift radically their hearts and minds. These iconic images of the brave and singular standing strong stand alone, and in their composed quietude call into question the cultural belief in strength in numbers since the image of one individual oftentimes seems to become responsible for igniting the forward momentum of an entire social movement. I see superheroes of social movements as occupying a space different than the space their group occupies: as brave outsider and rogue force. Indeed, such superheroes act with singularity, eschew belonging. I argue here that social movement superheroes inhabit a particular outsider-ness and inspire widespread empathy in a way that flies in the face of how we traditionally think about social movements and their ability to and means with which they enact social change. I suggest that recognizing the benefits of outsider-ness and certain perils of belonging allows us to look beyond these superheroes’ bravery and vulnerability to understand how social movements gain strength and succeed. Because those of us here are teachers of social movements and social change, activists, change agents, challengers of the status quo, I offer a different way of looking at the strength offered by obscurity, the ways in which anonymity and invisibility in the struggle for social change and equity—most often positioned as disadvantage—can instead serve as distinct advantage and place from which we might teach, model, and mount nonviolent social change.

In a recent Sunday *New York Times* op-ed, Ross Douthat⁶ argues all claims to the mythical, high-minded, liberal, bastion of cosmopolitanism should be viewed with suspicion and are in fact mired in an exclusionary, exclusive, and (in my reading) racist orientation to the world. Cosmopolitans feel entitled to

⁴ Cole, “The Superhero Photographs.”

⁵ I draw here from my own general nerd knowledge (via cultural osmosis) on the nature of superheroes as well as from select *Urban Dictionary* entries (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=superhero>).

⁶ Ross Douthat, “The Myth of Cosmopolitanism,” *The New York Times*, July 2, 2016, <http://nyti.ms/29p2xzo>.

claim citizenship of the world, claim to be absent what Virginia Woolf⁷ so aptly terms “unreal loyalties,” and claim no tribe. But, Douthat argues in a political era of nationalists versus internationalists, “nativists [versus] globalists,”⁸ genuine cosmopolitanism has become rare indeed. Today’s elite claim of cosmopolitanism is instead trapped within “a meritocratic order that transforms difference into similarity, by plucking the best and brightest from everywhere and homogenizing them.”⁹ What begins as and claims allegiance to “comfort with real difference, with forms of life . . . truly exotic relative to one’s own,” actually actively seeks comfort and familiarity, as well as a small tribe ingrained in “common educational experience, [and] their own shared values and assumptions.”¹⁰ Today’s group of cosmopolitans, of quirky, thoughtful, well-educated outsiders, of comfortable, jolly travelers, is what Douthat boldly confronts as something else entirely: “a nearly hereditary professional caste of lawyers, journalists, publicists, and intellectuals, an increasingly hereditary caste of politicians, tight coteries of cultural movers-and-shakers richly sponsored by multinational corporations”¹¹ who “love Afghan restaurants but would never live near an immigrant housing project, or American liberals who hail the end of whiteness while doing everything possible to keep their kids out of majority-minority schools.”¹² In other words, this privileged, highly cultured tribe that claims the mantle of liberalism is in fact just as exclusionary and power-hungry as the far, evangelical Right. Douthat advances his editorial because historically he has seen such claims to cosmopolitanism before, recognizes today’s cosmopolitans’ disingenuous openness bend “inexorably away from tribe and creed and toward nation-state,” and it looks all-too-familiarly like “a powerful caste’s self-serving explanation for why it alone deserves to rule the world.”¹³ Douthat terms this worldview not cosmopolitanism, but rather “elite tribalism.”¹⁴

The seductive, madly romantic charms of belonging to an intellectual band of enlightened world travelers are many—not the least of which is one’s claim, if not to an uncommon form of false neutrality, then at least to occupying some far-reaching moral and intellectual high ground. But, in an era of successful populist rebellion, I wonder how one remains true to the cause, refuses to assimilate, rather than succumbing to the stealthy siren power? How does one remain a revolutionary and decline simply to seize power? How can we be certain we are still “fighting the good fight” and not instead becoming lazy or corrupt when we win the day? In essence, the question I pose is, “How are we to remain outsiders?” I think this a particularly provocative and perhaps

⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1938).

⁸ Douthat, “The Myth of Cosmopolitanism.”

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, here quoting Peter Mandler who writes, after the Brexit vote, in *Dissent*.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

paradoxical question when one factors in how so many of us see our discipline as “endangered” and “under fire”—indeed, many of the people in this room have written, eloquently, passionately of this phenomenon and university organizations’ seemingly predatory actions toward Social Foundations of Education.

Retaining outsider-ness, rejecting cosmopolitanism, holding fast to the good fight, and not simply exchanging, in a Disney-esque way, “bad” power for “good” very well may require we examine and think differently about conceptualizing movements and the nature of social change. In a moment, I turn to Foucault and Woolf for help explicating outsider-ness and its merits, but first I want to mull over how social movements have been thought about and have functioned and how superheroes figure into social movements’ momentum. As folk who take as their life’s work conceptualizing, engineering, and enacting a more just world, it seems to me we have long been coöpted by the notion that a successful movement gains strength from numbers, that positive social change that brings about equity nearly always stems from the process of joining disparate individuals into a group, yet the victories of social movements—their talismans, their poster-children, those captured in iconic superhero images that rocket around the globe and sear themselves onto the cultural consciousness—have always stemmed from individual stories and the empathy they evoke: individual empathy that has often turned to public outcry. The power of large movements has always come down to empathy and outrage built on the stories and images of individuals—superheroes and outsiders every one.

I am certain we each easily can recall the kind of outsider of whom I speak, the captured image that suddenly made real some abstract, perhaps totally unfamiliar, social or political phenomenon, rendered the strange experience of the “other” familiar. These images of brave individuals travel through time, remain haunting, remind us of atrocities of thought and deed before social movements forged change, before good prevailed. Iconic superhero images from the Vietnam War turned public consciousness and a changed public politic mounted intense pressure on elected officials to withdraw troops. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and ’60s revealed and captured many such superheroes whose bravery resounds in decisions to stand firm or to go forward despite, at times, extreme peril for their own safety. The superhero image most indelible to me was made possible by Emmett Till’s mother, Mamie, who, in 1955, in the midst of crippling shock and grief held an open-casket funeral for her murdered son. The image of young Till’s mutilated and decomposing body haunts me, haunts my students who know only a sanitized version of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement when I show them the *Eyes on the Prize*¹⁵ episode picturing Till’s body. Mamie Elizabeth Till’s presence of mind and profound

¹⁵ *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954–1965*, produced by James A. DeVinney, Julian Bond, and Henry Hampton (Alexandria, VA: PBS Home Video, 2010), DVD.

bravery changed radically the state of U.S. race relations and propelled the Civil Rights Movement to new visibility and understanding because of her decision to share her very private horror with the world of strangers. Her and her family's sacrifice shocked many racist individuals into rethinking their racial politics; as a result those affected individuals could no longer see the hated group as "them," could never again return to a place of unknowing. Hers and many other individual superhero stories keep vital and alive social movements, populate the movement with those characters who make a difference because they appeal, without power, without violence, to the humanity of so many. I return shortly to the role of empathy, but now turn to theorize the outsider.

Foucault¹⁶ ties delinquency and deviancy to various forms of illegality, but he reveals those inhabiting such identity categories paradoxically as insiders because their illegalities are engineered to build not only the carceral archipelago, but also to fuel the dominant power structure by committing and masking crimes of the bourgeoisie. For Foucault, the outsider, mentioned only briefly through a single story late in *Discipline and Punish*, is another thing entirely. He recounts the story of a 13-year-old boy who "opposed . . . the discourse of the law that made him delinquent"¹⁷ when brought before a judge to answer the charge of vagabondage. This young man consciously, conscientiously refuses the normalizing, civilizing influence of all social institutions designed to confine and control him—much to the confusion of the judge and much to the analytic delight of the *La Phalange* reporter—and documents "a violent split between the accused and society."¹⁸ This child is sentenced to two years in a reformatory, yet he refuses to be coerced into the power structure designed to confine him, to rob him of what he very clearly sees as the fundamental freedoms—and delights—of personhood. He answers the most elemental social question—"What is your station?"—indicating with reply after reply that, while he refuses utterly "the simplest expression of . . . established order in society," he nevertheless transcends "indiscipline" in his extraordinary, ordinary life by working only for self—never for master, never for hierarchy, never for home, never for "secure future."¹⁹ For no matter how much we may criticize—moreover may indeed hate—the omnipresent press of surveillance, residing within our "station" inside the whole, huge normalizing carceral machine offers things of which we cannot get enough: comfort, security, belonging, tribe, nation, coterie. And so the greatest barrier to outsider-ness and

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1991).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 290.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 291–92.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 291.

our full allegiance to what Foucault terms “the affirmation of a living force”²⁰ is the extreme difficulty of disavowing belonging.

In her brilliant epistolary, educational treatise, Virginia Woolf moves stealthily to crush her reader with ample evidence that upper-class women, the so-called “daughters of educated men,”²¹ should throw off their Victorian societal chains, forsake their patriarchal allegiances, and mount an all-out effort to prevent war—critical since women serve as society’s conscience, she argues. She proposes an Outsiders’ Society,²² insisting it break all convention with the typical “conglomeration of people into [private, honorary] societies” which, she opines, “releases what is most selfish and violent, least rational and humane in the individuals themselves.”²³ Her Outsiders’ Society would “have no honorary treasurer, . . . no office, no committee, no secretary; it would call no meetings; it would hold no conferences,” but would consist of “educated men’s daughters working in their own class . . . and by their own methods for liberty, equality, and peace,” but first binding “themselves by oath . . . not to fight with arms.”²⁴ Woolf evidences how, while many honorary societies band together to influence opinion, outcome, or battle, the Outsiders’ Society eschews demonstration, display, and ceremony, remaining “elastic”²⁵ of opinion, anonymous of allegiance, and indifferent of dominion. Again, these outsiders must be “anonymous and elastic before everything,”²⁶ for “ease and freedom, the power to change and the power to grow, can only be preserved by obscurity.”²⁷ For, should women pridefully follow their countrymen into war, succumb to the press of patriotism, don the sartorial splendor of battle, even figuratively, women cleave violently and permanently female private and male public, disregard how “the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other,” and render all of us—women and men—complicit in the construction of “Führer or Duce,”²⁸ and moreover render themselves one and the same with these tyrannical engineers of warfare’s “dead bodies and ruined houses”²⁹ rather than remain in obscurity so as to become architects of the “dream of peace, the dream of freedom.”³⁰

For both Foucault and Woolf, outsider-ness rustles just beyond society’s influence, along the fringe, occasionally manifests in those somehow comfortable with a lack of power, thrives among those who fly well below the

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 290.

²¹ Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 4.

²² *Ibid.*, 106.

²³ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

radar of social institutions' many normalizing influences. Both Foucauldian vagabond and Woolfian educated man's daughter are ignored, invisible, cast aside, while the sacrifices of the two are expected, taken-for-granted. Much as Barbara Ehrenreich argues the poor are the great humanitarians of society,³¹ the catch-work-as-catch-may vagabond's and the uneducated daughter of an educated man's sacrifices benefit richly the classes they serve, but their contributions are largely anonymous, invisible, unheralded—if not out-and-out scoffed at or resented. In many respects, both these groups lead individual, isolated lives cut off from tribe or coterie by a profound lack of "station." For the vagabond, this is because he exists below the social order, and for the educated man's daughter isolation results from social conventions that render her, until married, a ward of her father's home and thereafter and forever a ward of her husband's home.

Neither Woolf nor Foucault cast outsiders as a band, merry or otherwise, but illustrate outsiders' spectacular or small resistances occurring by singular, oftentimes secreted means, even as "experiment[s] in passivity."³² For the vagabond may only occupy the shadowy spaces open to his caste, and the educated man's daughter those drawing-room corners open to her sex. Yet outsiders, "owing to their comparative freedom from certain inhibitions and persuasions, can carry out much more easily than those who"³³ necessarily belong to groups in positions with the public's ear or groups permitted free movement and choice. Neither may claim tribe nor enjoy a teeming crowd of their own, because neither may ever lay claim to even the most common vestige of cosmopolitanism; he or she will never belong, never know security, never be well-traveled, never be entitled to claim tribe, nation, coterie, never rule the world.

So, I return to the question: What is necessary for a movement to retain its resistance? What does it take for a movement to stay "fresh"? Moreover, when do outsiders who join together to take on a vital cause become instead a group seeking to seize power, thus abdicating their outsider-ness? Is it possible for members of a movement to remain a community without becoming a horde? I ardently hope our humanity precludes us ever from wishing such an isolated fate on any individual as vagabond or educated man's daughter, but Foucault and Woolf teach us—and two forms of evidence in Woolf's argument (newspapers and biographies found in one's father's library) reinforce their reply—obscurity guarantees outsider-ness. Again, we have come to think of real change coming from likeminded folk banding together, from that surge of strength residing only within numbers helping others to notice and understand a societal wrong, but with the banding of individual outsiders into one movement the Outsider Society comes instead into real danger, for movements must enter systems of power to

³¹ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dime: On [Not] Getting by in America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001).

³² Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 117.

³³ *Ibid.*

enact change, must work within systems of power, and then, once inside, the outsider is easily subsumed by the system; indeed systems of power are designed so as to corrupt: to remake outsider into insider, worker, bureaucrat, and hungry drudge from the indisciplined, raw material of outsiders. The reliable processes of social organizations designed and operating as power structures do not simply normalize the outsider, but render the outsider greedy for belonging; Foucault lays out in rich detail the history of the normalizing pull of social institutions such as prison, clinic, army, and school, while Woolf recounts the beguiling whisper of patriotism “For God and the [splendid] Empire,”³⁴ greed for a good salary from the professions, intrusions of other “unreal loyalties,”³⁵ and the one-belonging’s complicity in the atrocities of war. So it is thereby that movements make monsters.

What can be done? Perhaps we should reconsider some of the perils, the terrors of neoliberalism, reverse our suspicion. Neoliberalism seeks to divide us, to pit individuals against one another as consumers in competition for finite resources, but what if neoliberalism’s division, its isolation, offers instead salvation?: the obscurity of outsider-ness. How can people together confront, call attention to, and change a frightfully inequitable world without becoming just another steamrolling machine in an insatiable search for power?: by remaining individuals with individual stories capable of inspiring the empathy of others, remaining individuals capable of inspiring, in ourselves and among others, indisciplined acts of bravery. Although neither Foucault nor Woolf utilize the term bravery when speaking of the outsider, it is present in their every example and a critical quality with every right to be listed right alongside obscurity—in the same breath, even. I argue for the need to relearn, re-acculturate the term “movement,” rethink how to move together forward as individuals, as outsiders, replete with and made splendid by bravery. As Foucault’s vagabond teaches us, “it is indiscipline rather than . . . criminal offense, that causes . . . rupture,”³⁶ and it is through our indisciplined acts as outsiders that the cultural idea of “movement” and its relation to power will at last be ruptured; then we might, as individuals, inhabit fully the bravery usually reserved for whole social movements and “find out new ways of approaching ‘the public’; singling it into separate people” since, as Woolf reminds us, the danger in a loss of outsider-ness is the formation of a power-hungry horde, acting as nothing more than “one monster, gross in body, feeble in mind.”³⁷

In our work as teachers, as activists, as agents of social change, and as avowed outsiders, we must commit to nonviolence, and in so doing continuously interrogate self as to the nature of power and its relation to nonviolence,³⁸ the

³⁴ Ibid., 70.

³⁵ Ibid., 78.

³⁶ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 291.

³⁷ Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 98.

³⁸ I am indebted to Alaina Winters for introducing me to the theory of nonviolent communication as well as for her thoughtful feedback on this address.

reason being power is always and inescapably violent. Power is always related to “the necessity of combat and the rules of strategy,”³⁹ is always at its base warmongering, is never far from “the distant roar of battle,”⁴⁰ the horror of “ruined houses and dead bodies,”⁴¹ the spectacle of war. Any social movement cannot and should not bury its intent under a deep layer of indignation, cannot and should not paint a thick coat to cover its purpose under good intentions. Let me say it plainly: unless led by tremendous, thoughtful, humane folk who hold peace *absolutely sacred*, as did the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (himself an avowed outsider), a social movement is a declaration of war, is the deployment of another elite tribe bent on ruling the world, another however-focused-upon-justice grab for rule. As avowed outsiders, we cannot recreate, must not duplicate the barbarity, the abomination of war under the guise of positive social change, for such a move can only steal our humanity, rendering us not outsider, but savage. Such change will require a keen focus on avowed outsider-ness, will mean we eschew cosmopolitanism, pledge first and foremost never to pick up arms. Our connections to one another will then no longer be rooted in power or intellect, we will no longer be joined by nation or social institution, but rather by a single, human, humane ideal: empathy.

Empathy and compassion keep focus on the individual, cast an individual’s story as singular, recognize the humanity, bravery, and purposeful vulnerability of the peaceful, avowed outsider. The act of empathy is what keeps the cause fresh, wrenches our need for belonging away from the unreal loyalties of nation, state, tribe, politic, sex, coterie and resets our comfort in belonging among humanity. Mine is not a new idea, but harkens merely to a recognition of the history of social movements. Outsiders have long been the face of revolution, been responsible for those events that turn the tide of public opinion toward the direction of right, for movements have no chance of bringing about change if their cause cannot inspire empathy. A group might inspire some abstract form of empathy, but true empathy—empathy that can change the way a person sees his or her whole world, empathy that inspires social change—only comes when one person, despite differences in power, politics, or persuasion, sees and recognizes him or herself in another person.

As Maxine Greene teaches us, “imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible” and “permits us to give credence to alternative realities.”⁴² In times of social change, empathy resides within a moment between two individuals during which an act of bravery, oftentimes in the face of profound suffering, vulnerability, and risk, moves the one-watching to forge a connection grounded in emotional, humane recognition. And it is such change among individuals that eventually culminates in widespread social change. Drawn

³⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 308.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 10–11.

⁴² Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 3.

largely from visual representations of the brave, peaceful, individual acts of avowed outsiders, they become synonymous with a movement's recognition. These everyday people rendered extraordinary come to exemplify the moment when public opinion turns sharply toward equity, away from injustice and toward the common good: in this way avowed outsiders dedicated to peace and social change are made worthy of the term "superhero." "Unarmed and unafraid,"⁴³ these members of Outsiders' Society, these vagabonds, heed the call of human suffering and structural inequity and bravely step forward, again and again, to right social wrongs. Far from "homogenizing" those within a social movement into "an elite tribe,"⁴⁴ empathy allows "the affirmation of a living force"⁴⁵ that makes possible the flourishing of one's fundamental freedoms, and inspires superheroes to act, which opens the possibility of enduring social change.

⁴³ Teju Cole, "Superhero Photographs."

⁴⁴ Douthat, "The Myth of Cosmopolitanism."

⁴⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 290.
