

**Storied Social Change:  
Recovering Jane Addams's Early Model of Constituent Storytelling  
to Navigate the Practical Challenges of Speaking for Others**  
[DRAFT]

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**Abstract**  
[189 words]

This essay recovers Jane Addams's (1860-1935) practice of constituent storytelling as a resource for contemporary social change nonprofit professional practice and activism. Whereas feminist theorizing is rich with resources for theorizing about constituent storytelling, Addams's life as both a publicly engaged philosopher and a social change nonprofit professional make her uniquely situated to provide practical ways forward for social change practitioners navigating the lived complexities of speaking for others in light of spatial stratification, subordinating structures, and epistemic exclusion. As a hybrid activist-scholar situated across diverse spaces, Addams serves as a bridge between feminist *theorizing* about speaking for others, and *practices* of it among social change nonprofit professionals and activists. I show that Addams reveals new ways of thinking about the practice of constituent storytelling for social change nonprofit professionals. Namely, in this lived context, speaking for others entails speaking for others *through one's own story*. Responsible constituent storytelling names oneself as a speaker, owns one's own social standpoint in this rhetorical naming practice, and orients the story through one's own journey – a journey inevitably riddled with failures and faulty assumptions – towards democratic *neighborship* with the Other across difference.

Keywords: feminist Pragmatism, Jane Addams, public philosophy, speaking for others, political exclusion, epistemic exclusion, constituent storytelling, social change.

Under what conditions, if at all, can social change nonprofit professionals and activists, tell the stories of their constituents and ‘speak for others’? Linda Alcoff posed a similar question for feminist theory almost 30 years ago, “Is the discursive practice of speaking for others ever a valid practice, and, if so, *what are the criterion for validity?* In particular, is it ever valid to speak for others who are unlike me or who are less privileged than me?” (Alcoff 1991, 7; the emphasis is mine).

This essay looks to the writings and practices of social reformer and American Pragmatist philosopher, Jane Addams (1860-1935), to recover resources for thinking about the practical instantiation of Alcoff’s “criterion for [the] validity” of speaking for others. The essay specifically examines this question as it pertains to the practice of constituent storytelling within contemporary social change work. While contemporary feminist theorizing is rich with resources for thinking about constituent storytelling, Addams’s life as both a social reformer and a publicly engaged philosopher make her uniquely situated to provide practical ways forward for social change nonprofit professionals and activists navigating this problem. As a hybrid activist-scholar situated across diverse spaces, Addams serves as a bridge between feminist *theorizing* about speaking for others, and *practices* of it among social change nonprofit professionals and activists.

The essay begins by examining the contemporary discourse about the storytelling efforts of social change nonprofit professionals and activists. Many Community-Based Organizational efforts emphasize the value of constituent storytelling for social change. The recent “Check Your Narrative” movement within the social change nonprofit sector has drawn attention to the potential for these efforts to repatriate and colonize constituent stories. Some critics within the sector go so far as to suggest that we can “speak *only* for ourselves”.

I situate the concerns of the Check Your Narrative movement through Alcoff's framework. Then, I argue that under certain social constraints correlated with oppression, many stories lack the narrative reach they would need for motivating social change. In this structural context, the practice of constituent storytelling among social change nonprofits and activists may in fact be a practical necessity that is facilitative of speaking and listening across difference and motivating social change. Under these constraints, constituent storytelling may even fulfill a central call to action within the profession to enhance the narrative reach and epistemic standing of marginalized people.

In her social activism, Jane Addams understood these constraints on subaltern stories. Yet, she was also deeply sensitive to the responsibilities attached to the practice of constituent storytelling. I show that Addams's own practice of constituent storytelling – embedded in her thick conception of democracy as social ethics – lends important and relevant ways for thinking about Alcoff's criterion for the validity of speaking for others. Addams's approach lends engaged ways for thinking about Alcoff's ultimate conclusion that, "It is not *always* the case that when others unlike me speak for me I have ended up worse off, or that when we speak for others they end up worse off" (Alcoff 1991, 29). Moreover, Addams's legacy lends social change professionals and activists some important tools for more carefully and responsibly navigating the lived space between "speaking for others" and "speaking [only] for oneself".

### **The "Check Your Narrative" Project in the Social Change Nonprofit Sector and Worries about "Speak for Yourself" Callouts**

Many social change nonprofit professionals and activists share an affinity for the potential power of storytelling for motivating social change. Indeed, for many Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), constituent storytelling, in donor and public relations especially, is a

critical element of the organization's overarching 'narrative strategy.' That is, many believe that such storytelling is essential for catalyzing social change (The Opportunity Agenda 2015; Saltmarshe 2018).

These efforts among social change professionals share important assumptions about the rhetorical value of situating claims to social justice in the lived experiences and stories of constituents (e.g., SAIH, n.d.; Working Narratives 2013; The Opportunity Zingaro 2009; Network 2015). Such rhetorical strategies are believed to have the potential to challenge stigmas, interrupt Other-ness, and reach wider publics in a stratified social world. What is more, when told the right way, such stories can reveal our interconnection across social, economic, and even spatial stratification, stimulate empathy, and motivate social change (Gillman 2013). Importantly, these assumptions about the social and political value of stories are supported by a significant body of empirical research (e.g., Ramasubramanian 2011; Johnson, et. al. 2014).

Despite the potential of narrative for social change, social change nonprofit professionals and activists, as well as feminist theorists like Alcoff, share general suspicions towards attempts to reproduce the narratives of marginalized people. For example, in its 2018 Winter edition the *Nonprofit Quarterly* (NPQ) hosted a cluster of articles on narrative strategy, "Reframing Narratives: New Scaffolding on Which to Construct a Different Future". Articles in this cluster focused around decolonizing philanthropy and calling out, "the narratives that underwrite the practices of the civil sector – and the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors in particular - that sometimes alienate the very people nonprofits claim to represent and serve" (NPQ 2019). The ultimate aim of this cluster was to inspire organizations towards reshaping public narratives about their constituents, and for building the institutional and social infrastructure for more empowering ways of sharing constituent stories in those narrative strategy efforts. The editors

advise that this narrative strategy entails that marginalized people “shape, relanguage, and own” their own stories: “Until the narratives about the “disadvantaged,” “underserved,” “dependent,” “at risk,” “opportunity” folks are shaped, relanguaged, and owned by those same folks, the tales about them will be mostly absurd and will drain power from the building of a strong, sustainable, shared future” (NPQ 2018c, 28).

Resistance to telling the stories of others emerges as an appropriate response to a long history of white saviorism within philanthropic work, where privileged community-based practitioners with moralistic conceptions of poverty define constituents' problems for them, and from this perspective assert needs onto communities. Jane Addams herself was critical of this tendency among her contemporaries (e.g., Addams 1902). Although not always ill-intentioned, attempts to widen the reach of marginalized persons' stories can contaminate and colonize such narratives (Young 2000; Walker 2007). For instance, many organizations recount stories of their constituents for organizational *gain*, while others *tokenize* constituents for fundraising purposes.<sup>1</sup> Under intense pressure to fund their operations, some CBOs cherry pick “deserving” residents to demonstrate their organization’s program effectiveness, to bolster grant proposals, and to attract potential donors. Ultimately, these practices perpetuate the dominant narrative within the individualized politics of poverty in the U.S. of a large class of “deserving poor”, and they isolate poverty from its structural context.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a contemporary example, consider DEC’s (Disasters Emergency Committee) recent 2017 East Africa Famine Appeal and Yemen Crisis Appeal. Critics note that both of these ad campaigns “invoked white spokesperson tropes”, presented suffering constituents as passive recipients of aid that bordered on “poverty porn”, celebrated “poverty tourism” with celebrity cameos, and decontextualized constituents’ suffering from structural contexts (Radiaid.com 2017). Consider also the contemporary food justice movement that raises awareness of paternalistic and indignifying human services practices and attitudes within the food bank sector (e.g., Hassanein 2008; Treleven 2017).

<sup>2</sup> For an historically based examination of the problematic persistence of the concept of “the deserving poor”, see Critchlow and Parker 1998.

More recently, there has been pressure on organizations to attend to these problems of *misrepresentation* within the sector. Leaders of the Check Your Narrative movement in the social change sector rightly ask, “What self-respecting person would allow herself to be diagnosed by another with no experience of her situation and with no consultation? Much of the philanthropic and nonprofit sector should be brought up on charges of experimenting, without consent, on human subjects” (NPQ 2019).

Some nonprofit organizations are even centered around creating channels for nonprofit constituent storytelling accountability itself. Take for instance, ‘Radi-Aid: Africa for Norway’, an awareness and nonprofit-accountability project that awards annual ‘Rusty Radiator Awards’ to relief agencies that tokenize their own constituents through the stories they tell in ad campaigns. Radi-Aid is especially critical of ad campaigns that (1) tell constituent stories in ways that deteriorate public perceptions of their dignity, agency, and capacity for self-efficacy and (2) isolate their presentation of constituents from the global-economic structural forces that frame their poverty and marginality. Radi-Aid presents ‘Golden Radiator Awards’ to organizations that depict constituent self-efficacy and situate marginality in structural injustice in creative ways that suggest the interdependency of their constituents’ poverty with potential donors’ privilege (SAIH n.d.).

In response to these worries about colonizing constituent stories, some pressure on organizations and their leaders has taken a more isolationist turn. This shift echoes Alcoff’s worries for feminist theory almost 30 years ago, that “there is a strong, albeit contested, current...which holds that speaking for others is arrogant, vain, unethical, and politically illegitimate” (Alcoff 1991, 6). Within some pockets of the sector, call outs like, “Speak for yourself”, “Move over”, and even, “Sit down and shut up”, suggest that representation is

inherently and inevitably colonizing and “a kind of discursive coercion and even violence” (Alcoff 1991, 6). Drawing on Conflict Resolution Communication literature and strategies, cross-collaboration organizations and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) educational consulting firms that facilitate discussions around race and gender equity, often list among the discourse rules for participants, “Speak only for yourself” (Dessel and Rogge 2008; Choudhury 2015). While this rule is vital for productive discussions about race- and gender-inequality, social change nonprofit professionals run the risk of overextending these discourse rules into their own professional practice indiscriminately. In such cases they may leave these discourse spaces doubting their capacity to ever legitimately speak on behalf of their constituents. Much as Alcoff observed, “the danger of speaking for others has caused many people to question its validity” altogether (Alcoff 1991, 12).

While principled, this “retreat response” to the problem of speaking for others is especially concerning from the perspective of social change nonprofit professional practice because “it significantly undercuts the possibility of political effectivity” (Alcoff 1991, 17). That is, an absolute social prohibition on constituent storytelling imposes a mandate against centralized counter-narrative campaigns, such as the one launched by the leaders highlighted in the Nonprofit Quarterly’s 2018 cluster. Besides political effectivity, the Speak for Yourself retreat from the problem of speaking for others rests on fundamentally flawed assumptions of classical liberalism: an individualistic conception of political agency, an essentializing ontology of social identity (Alcoff 1991; Young 1990; Young 1994), and a restricted conception of exclusion that ignores its pervasively epistemic dimensions (Fricker 2007; Medina 2013).

Yet the need for marginalized person’s stories *to be heard* could not be more urgent. Ours is a time when corporate global consolidation and increasing social inequality are prominent,

post-industrial urban landscapes are forgotten and marginalized communities are relegated there, and radical political polarization is instigated by dog-whistle politics and coordinated misinformation campaigns on social media platforms. As Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz explain in their recent book, *Insubordinate Spaces: Improvisation and Accompaniment for Social Justice*, in our contemporary American political context, “the subordination of democratic opportunities and aspirations has become a primary goal of major social institutions” (Tomlinson and Lipsitz 2020, 7). These deep fissures of stratification – both spatial and psychological – impose barriers to collective action, immobilize marginalized resistance groups, and subordinate, silence, and distort the social justice claims they bring forward in their mobilization efforts.

As social change nonprofits reimagine their role in this subordinating political context, they are faced with questions about what responsible constituent storytelling looks like, since in this context, there are a variety of ways that CBOs and their organizational leaders must inevitably speak for others (Robinson 2018; Villaneuva 2018). For example, many CBOs have begun to function as facilitators for collective action and representatives of marginal communities in response to the failings of these communities’ own elected representatives.<sup>3</sup> And some have been invited by local politicians to represent community interests in public decision-making, despite not having been formally elected by their constituents to do so (Levine 2016). Many organizations are dependent on government grants for operations and must regularly define their constituents’ needs in grant proposals. And in donor relations and advertising, telling the story of one’s mission, and by extension of one’s constituents, is vital for procuring funds.

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<sup>3</sup> Take for example Make the Road New York (MRNY), a “membership model” organization in New York City. The organization is sustained by over 23,000 dues-paying member-constituents, much like a YMCA. While MRNY does provide direct services such as legal aid and public aid enrollment programs, it is not primarily a direct service provision organization, but is rather, an *organizing* organization and community center. That is, the mission centers around facilitating LatinX community organizing and empowering civic participation through education and leadership development, employee recruiting, and policy innovation.

The point here is that even if social change organizations primarily function as spaces for coordinating resistance efforts among the marginalized, the very socioeconomic and political structure of the social change sector means that these organizations are inevitably bound up with the work of *speaking for*.

Thus, there is a type of “crisis of representation” that emerges in the sector for social change nonprofit professionals and activists, a potential conflict between a call to action to enhance the reach of subaltern stories, and the accepted principle to “Speak only for Yourself”. I borrow from Alcoff to explain the dilemma: “If I don’t speak for those less privileged than myself, am I abandoning my political responsibility to speak out against oppression, a responsibility incurred by the very fact of my privilege?...The question arises as to whether all instances of speaking for others should be condemned and, if not, where the line of demarcation should be drawn” (Alcoff 1991, 8).

Alcoff would be resistant of Speak for Yourself callouts within the sector. Yet she would also be cautious of an endorsement of constituent storytelling. She notes that there should be a general presumption against speaking for others, “especially among academics!” (Alcoff 1991, 24). But for social change nonprofit professionals and activists, there is no question of *whether* they should speak for their constituents. As we saw above, *speaking for* is structurally built into the nature of the problems at hand (i.e., spatial stratification, subordinated avenues for formal participation, and epistemic exclusion), and additionally, is built into the very structure of the profession itself (which may actually turn out to be one of the major ethical problems for the industry as a whole). So social change nonprofit professionals and activists still must ask, with Alcoff, “where the line of demarcation should be drawn”, or rather, *how* (Alcoff 1991, 8).

What does all of this mean for social change *practice*? Alcoff's own response to the problem of speaking for others sets out "interrogatory practices" for potential speakers, that is, questions they ought to ask themselves when they are inclined to, or in the case of social change nonprofit leaders inevitably compelled to, speak for others. As I see it, there are two limitations of Alcoff's interrogatory remedy for application to social change work that make looking to Jane Addams a worthwhile endeavor. First, while Alcoff's interrogatory practices are significant contributions for feminist *theorizing*, social change nonprofit professionals and activists would benefit from more practical and grounded examples for constituent storytelling. More than theorizing about constituent storytelling, Addams shows us how to bring these interrogatory practices to life in a nuanced world where the problem of speaking for others is more than theoretical, but a lived problem that social change nonprofit professionals and activists must daily navigate. Addams reveals the inevitability of failures in the practice, and how to move forward in spite of the necessity of the practice. And second, while interrogatory practices can be resources for interpersonal storytelling, social change nonprofit organizations also need *organizational strategies* for responsible constituent storytelling. What kinds of organizational structures, policies, and cultures can promote narrative strategies centered on more responsible constituent storytelling, and how can organizations institutionalize those?

Jane Addams's methods for engaging offer resources for social change nonprofit professionals and activists not fully explored within Alcoff's project and feminist theorizing. Addams's life as both a social reformer and a publicly engaged philosopher make her uniquely situated to provide practical ways forward for social change nonprofit professionals and activists navigating this problem. As a hybrid activist-scholar, Addams serves as a bridge between

feminist *theorizing* about speaking for others, and *practices* of it among social change nonprofit professionals and activists.

### **Jane Addams and Constraints on Story's Reach: Spatial Stratification, Subordinating Structures, and Epistemic Exclusion**

Here I introduce Jane Addams specifically through demonstrating her sensitivity to the structural constraints on the reach of subaltern stories. I situate this concern in her conception of 'democracy as social ethics'. Addams's understanding of the constraints on story's reach reveals the practical necessity, and perhaps even the moral obligation in some contexts, for social change nonprofit professionals and activists to participate in responsible practices of constituent storytelling.

Jane Addams co-founded Hull House in 1889 with her lifelong friend Ellen Gates Starr. Located at the intersection of a number of working-class immigrant neighborhoods and slums on the Near West Side of Chicago, Hull House can best be described as a type of Community-Based Organization and center for social reform. While Addams was a social elite and an outsider to the immigrant neighborhoods where Hull House was established, her leadership at Hull House was notably *responsive to* rather than *assertive of* community needs (Fischer 1995; Seigfried 1996; Hamington 2001, 113; Fischer 2019). This approach anticipates the "with not for" value so prominently held by many contemporary social change organizations and causes. Addams was also a public intellectual and renowned progressive public speaker on social issues including such things as poverty, philanthropy, industrialism, group-based divisiveness, immigration, and war. And as Charlene Seigfried and others have demonstrated quite persuasively, Addams's

thought, writings, and activism at Hull House impacted the work of American philosophers and made substantial and unique contributions to the corpus (Seigfried 1996; 1999).<sup>4</sup>

It's important to note that much like her Pragmatist counterparts, Addams saw democracy as more than mere "political machinery", but as a value system itself, that is, as *a way of life*. She frequently refers to this "larger and more satisfying democracy" in terms of "social ethics", by which she means an extension of the sympathies that are more naturally felt within familial and private institutions and a widening of one's sense of their moral obligations to society at large (Addams 1902). On this she writes, "If we believe that the individual struggle for life may widen into a struggle for the lives of all, surely the demand of an individual for decency and comfort, for a chance to work and obtain the fullness of life may be widened until it gradually embraces all the members of the community, and rises into a sense of the common weal" (Addams 1902, 61).<sup>5</sup>

Addams's thick conception of democracy as social ethics cannot be conceptually pulled apart from her epistemology. Much like her Pragmatist colleagues, Addams worries about the limitations of subjectivity, especially among elites, for appreciating the suffering of others, and she was critical of liberal individualism for eclipsing the interconnectedness of city residents under the new social and economic system of industrial capitalism (Hamington 2009). Addams

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<sup>4</sup> See also Leffers 1993; Hamington 2001, 2004, and 2009; Whipps 2004, and Fischer 2004, 2010. For an excellent historical account of Addams's intellectual relationships with the men of the Chicago School, see especially Deegan 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere Addams writes, "Just when our affection becomes large enough to care for the unworthy among the poor as we would care for the unworthy among our own kin, is certainly a perplexing question. To say that it should never be so, is a comment upon our democratic relations to them which few of us would be willing to make" (Addams 2002, 31). See also, Whipps 2004, 123) who explains, "Addams believed that to stay isolated from people engaged in the daily struggle for survival "deadens the sympathies and shrivels the power of enjoyment"...Addams understood that neither individuals nor groups could have a meaningful existence or advance in complex industrial and technological societies without jointly creating societies that allow space for public work together towards mutual aims. Interdependence, diversity, or the need for hearing the voices of "others," is essential to Addams's pragmatist and feminism – indeed she believed that having many diverse experiences was a moral responsibility."

frequently mourns that her time had become one of increasing wealth disparities and spatial stratification between the socioeconomic and political elites, and working classes (e.g., Addams 1893; Addams 1902).

The birth of the modern industrial city brought new social challenges: “growing ranks of the working poor and unemployed”, the exploitation of workers, inadequate housing and labor conditions, and the challenges of immigration and relocation from rural to urban settings which included crime and social dislocation (Seigfried 1999, 213). Middle-class and elite Chicago residents, many of whom self-identified as “native Americans”, could afford to retreat from cohabitation with and daily exposure to the working poor, immigrants, ethnic minorities, and the city slums (Addams 2005, 23). Under Addams’s leadership, Hull House protested this spatial trend by intentionally placing itself in the heart industrial poverty, the Nineteenth Ward.

Many of Addams’s constituents could not vote, and the Nineteenth Ward was notorious for political corruption that benefited the wealthy at the expense of Ward residents. Addams’s neighbors endured filthy streets, inadequate garbage collection, disease-carrying public water, unsafe housing, and poor public schools (Davis 2000, 121-123). Besides being significantly impacted by political corruption and robber baron industry leaders, attempts at political participation through collective action were regularly undermined and even violently quelled by privately funded security agencies like the Pinkertons.

Many of these features of modern industrial capitalism – extreme wealth disparities, labor exploitation and hostile labor relations, urban poverty, displaced migrant and immigrant populations – exacerbated the epistemic limitations already inherent in human subjectivity through producing group divisions, social group hierarchies based in inequitable relations of power, and harmful prejudices towards more marginalized social groups. Anticipating feminist

social standpoint theory, Addams explains eloquently, “No one so poignantly realizes the failures in the social structure as the man at the bottom, who has been most directly in contact with those failures and has suffered the most” (Addams 1910, 183).<sup>6</sup>

Addams was sensitive to the structural forces that disempowered Hull House neighbors, from wider participation and inclusion in social life. She was also deeply sensitive to the various dimensions of epistemic exclusion that emerged in this context. Many of the Hull House neighbors could not read or write to communicate their interests to the wider public. But even if they could communicate their own stories, it is important to note that because of who they were – immigrants, ethnic minorities, and poor – they lacked the epistemic standing to counter the dominant narratives that were relied on by elites as justification for their exploitation. In *Newer Ideals of Peace*, Addams’s mourns that “native” Americans have “not yet admitted [the marginalized] into real political fellowship” (Addams 2005, 22). She roots these practices of exclusion in “an attitude of contempt, of provincialism, [and a] survival of the spirit of the conqueror toward an inferior people” (Addams 2005, 29).

Addams saw that many social myths about her constituents functioned to maintain the dominant social order and to justify the exclusion of the Other from full political and social participation in life. In *Newer Ideals of Peace* (1907), she provides a host of examples where the “patriotism of the clan” harms democratic social relations: the conception of the immigrant had by her contemporaries, the conception of “the criminal” held by the police officer and politician, the view that the weak are justified in being dominated by the strong held by advocates of child labor, and the polarizing attitudes between employers associations and trade unions in the

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<sup>6</sup> Dewey celebrates this feature of Addams’s thought (1996, LW 15. 196-7).

aftermath of the Pullman Strike of 1894.<sup>7</sup> In “Our National Self-Righteousness” (1933), Addams discusses her concerns with “the spirit of superiority” held by so many Americans (in Elshstain 2002).

Addams’s constituents suffered what Susan Dieleman has described as “exclusion from the epistemic imaginary” (Dieleman 2012, 95). In her feminist Pragmatist defense of a resolution for the problem of epistemic exclusion, Dieleman explains the double bind at the heart of the problem of epistemic exclusion: “Individuals are unable to deploy the accepted norms and practices of a community, and they are further unable to challenge those norms and practices or create more inclusive ones because they are a specific type of person or they speak in ways unacceptable to people and norms that populate and police the hegemonic epistemic imaginary” (Dieleman 2012, 95).

At Hull House, people from differently socially situated and ethnic backgrounds built things together and embarked on new shared experiences with one another. Neighbors worked across ethnic differences to plan community projects and resist their shared marginalization as ethnic minorities. John Dewey called Hull House “a social clearing house”, a place where there was “a mixing people up with each other...under conditions which will promote their getting acquainted with the best side of each other” (Dewey 1996, MW 2. 90). His characterization of it paints a vibrant picture that is worth including in full here.

[Hull House] is not merely a place where ideas and beliefs may be exchanged, not merely in the arena of formal discussion – for argument alone breeds misunderstanding and fixes prejudices – but in ways where ideas are incarnated in human form and clothed with the winning grace of personal life. Classes for study may be numerous, but all are regarded

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<sup>7</sup> It’s worth noting that in his treatment of group behavior in *Ethics* (1908), Dewey engages in a discussion where he identifies a number of criticisms of ingroup virtues like loyalty. This discussion is brief, however, and he points the reader to Addams’s writings for further development on the topic since, “the problems which [these ingroup virtues] cause in modern democracy have been acutely described by Jane Addams” (Dewey 1996, MW 5.135-6). Here Dewey references Addams’s *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902, 222-77) and Chapter V of Addams’s *Newer Ideals of Peace* (1907).

as modes of bringing people together, or doing away with barriers of caste, or class, or race, or type of experience that keep people from real communion with each other. (Dewey 1996, MW 2. 90)

Hull House residents were educated young women from established families who lived and worked among the neighbors under Addams's constant leadership towards speaking across difference and working with, not for. She instructs Hull House residents not to compromise the philosophy of the solidarity of the human race on the basis of one "drunken woman" or "idiot boy", and she warns that they must be "emptied of all conceit of opinion and all self-assertion, and ready to arouse and interpret the public opinion of their neighborhood" (Addams 1893, 23) Although it was not a central organizational aim – rather, community across difference was –, Hull House was in many ways where privileged young women went to get their "dominant narratives checked".

For Addams, this instantiation of Democracy was itself a way of resolving problems of formal, social, and epistemic exclusion. She points to "diversified human experience and resultant sympathy" and "the identification with the common lot" as "the foundation and guarantee of Democracy" and a means for generating more responsible social knowledge (Addams 1902, 7).<sup>8</sup> Hull House was itself "an epistemological portal" for this newer and more robust conception of democracy as social ethics (Hamington 2001, 106).

Living and working under conditions of marginalization and exploitation produces a great many quiet costs that limit the reach of one's story. Marginalization and exploitation, for example, limit one's structural access to the types of social and political spaces where narratives about social life and systems can be shared, publicized, and politicized. Marginalized people may also lack the capacities to effectively express their needs and perspectives publicly and

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<sup>8</sup> Owing to this legacy, contemporary feminist Pragmatists are distrustful of claims to impartiality or objectivity and recognize the epistemological value of pluralistic communities and "an inclusive problem-solving approach to social issues" (Seigfried 1996; Whipps and Lake 2017).

effectively.<sup>9</sup> For example, artistic ventures like documenting and sharing one's narrative experiences through a blog, youtube channel, or through art requires time, access to material resources (e.g., wifi and smart phone, at a minimum) and vibrant social and educational support systems that both inspire people's ability to imagine themselves participating in such a way and equip them with capacities for effectively participating in that way.

Hull House was itself a resource for reducing political participation costs for citizens.<sup>10</sup> For example, Hull House provided, "seed money and organization support for [the] start-up... of a boarding club that would accommodate working women and provide flexibility in rent collection should hard times, such as a strike, arise" (Hamington 2001, 113). It facilitated space for political participation and provided material and educational resources to develop the capacities necessary for effective and impactful political participation. Besides organizing adult social clubs, Hull House started a kindergarten and hosted boys and girls' clubs for teenagers. They added an art gallery in 1891, a playground of almost a full acre in 1892, a gymnasium that included rooms for men's clubs and a "diet kitchen" for providing food to the poor and sick in 1893, a club house in 1898, and a theater with a coffee house in 1899 (Knight 2010). At its peak, Hull House involved over thirteen buildings over an entire city block. Further additions included a swimming pool, art studio, music school, library, labor museum, drama groups, and a boarding

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<sup>9</sup> I develop this point out of James Bohman's account of "political poverty", which he defines as, "a group-related inability to make effective use of opportunities to influence the deliberative process" (Bohman 1996, 125). Bohman has developed the concept in terms of a broader focus on deliberative uptake, but as I am developing here, storytelling uptake is itself a function of participation. Bohman's capacities-based account reduces talk of effective participation and uptake to capacities, and in doing so shifts the burden of effective participation and uptake to marginalized people, rather than to the dominant discourse, which as Miranda Fricker (2007) has pointed out, lacks the hermeneutical resources for them to make sense of their experiences, or at least, to communicate them to a public in a way that will be effective. This is due to no shortcoming on their own or deprivation of their capacities, but rather, arises as a result of structural epistemic injustice.

<sup>10</sup> For accounts of participation costs as the concept has been developed in political theory, see for example Cooper 1979, Bohman 1996, and Cooper 2006.

club for girls (Knight 2010). Importantly, constituents themselves served in decision-making roles, and Hull House residents merely functioned as facilitators.

Dieleman suggests that argumentation alone is an inadequate means of producing social change, largely because it is also an inadequate remedy for persuasion in light of the problem of epistemic exclusion. Drawing on Rorty's evolutionary account of language and social progress, Dieleman explains,

Argumentation occurs in normal discourse, using the hermeneutical resources available, and according to the epistemic norms and practices determined by a society...however, in order to change the epistemic norms - those "agreed-upon conventions" that dictate what tools and methods can and cannot be used in argumentation - one must move beyond argumentation and outside normal discourse. In other words, it is only through abnormal discourse that the epistemic norms of normal, common sense discourse can be challenged, reformulated, or created. (Dieleman 2012, 103)<sup>11</sup>

Dieleman ultimately points to the ironist's form of persuasion as a remedy for epistemic exclusion. By introducing new language through metaphors where argument is not persuasive, the ironist "arouse[s] the sentiments that would lead to greater solidarity; to allow those who populate the dominant discourse to recognize marginalized groups as members of "we" rather than "they"." (Dieleman 2012, 104)

Interestingly, research on narrative and race boundary perceptions by cognitive behavioral scientists, social psychologists, and media communications scholars lends evidence to the potential social impact of Dieleman's remedy for epistemic exclusion (Mazzocco, et. al. 2010; Johnson et. al. 2014; Ramasubramanian 2011). For example, in a study that examined race identification, Johnson, Huffman, and Jasper (2014) found that when primed with a counterstereotypical story of a Muslim woman excerpted from Shaila Abdullah's fiction novel *Saffron Dreams* (2009, 57-64), study participants were more likely to perceive a Muslim-looking

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<sup>11</sup> Dieleman builds her account of epistemic exclusion out of Miranda Fricker's (2007) conception of hermeneutical injustice and Iris Marion Young's (2000) framework of democratic inclusion.

woman (whatever that means) as “mixed race” and “possibly American”. Researchers describe Abdullah’s protagonist: “an educated and strong-willed Muslim woman, Arissa, who is assaulted in a New York City subway station. She is pregnant and exhibits extraordinary courage by standing up to her attackers’ ethnic and religious slurs. There is significant inner monologue that accentuates the protagonist’s strength of character while providing exposure to Muslim culture” (Johnson, et. al. 2014, 84; citing Abdullah 2009).

Based on their series of experiments that examined the impact of reading such counterstereotypical narratives on race boundary perceptions, Johnson et. al. concluded that “it reduced categorical race perception in favor of perceiving people as being mixed race...and it inhibited the tendency to categorize mixed-race individuals with angry expressions as outgroup members” (88). Their research suggests that narrative fiction can potentially bridge the “empathy gap” for members of outgroups and induce self-other merging.

Anticipating this research, Addams regularly relied on constituent stories to enhance her arguments for social change and extend the reach of the Democracy project at Hull House. Fischer situates Addams’s rhetorical strategies in Fabian socialism and social evolutionary theorizing, conceptual frameworks that led Addams to believe that social change was gradual, and that argument alone was inadequate for stimulating it (Fischer 2019). Addams “sought to reshape her readers’ sensibilities” by repositioning news reports and arguments in stories of constituents in ways that broadened the reader’s imagination and cultivated sympathy (Fischer 2019, 11). In so doing Addams is able to indirectly defend – in a way that will be persuasive to her reading public – a structurally situated conception of poverty that reveals its emergence from industrial capitalism, over and against the individualistic and Other-ing conceptions of poverty that “populate the dominant discourse” (Dieleman, 2012, 95).

Fischer points out that Addams's often drew on Hull House success at democratic community across ethnic difference as an example of what democratic relations could be like under relative social equality, since despite their diversity of ethnic and regional backgrounds, Hull House neighbors were equally marginalized (2019). Addams would have realized the limitations of the Hull House model of social change, however – limited to the individuals who regularly participated in Hull House life. She identified a practical need for widening the reach of the Democracy project at Hull House.

### **Resources for Social Change Work: Practical Ways Forward for Social Change Workers**

Addams's writings are filled with examples of speaking for Hull House constituents, and as noted above, these writings were in fact an integral part of her social activism (Fischer 2019, 176). In what follows I look to her famous discussion of the fictional charity visitor in Chapter 2 of *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902) as one resource among many for imagining practical ways forward. I briefly show how Addams's rhetorical strategies provide helpful examples of Alcoff's remedial interrogatory practices that specifically speaks to Community-Based Organizing and social change work. I articulate and slightly reframe Alcoff's interrogatory practices as subheadings here, and in a way that is readily applicable for the social change worker. This analysis of Jane Addams also brings forward additional remedial interrogatory practices for social change workers not fully considered by Alcoff. I close the paper by pointing towards Hull House organizational strategies as additional resources for building infrastructures for responsible constituent storytelling and for narrative change.

*(1) Why, on this occasion, am I inclined to speak for my constituents?*<sup>12</sup>

As I have noted, the very structure of contemporary social change nonprofit work inevitably entails some degree of speaking for others. Day to day operations of writing grant proposals, maintaining donor relations, advertising, and establishing cross-sector relationships require some degree of speaking for others. And as I have also shown, being a marginalized stakeholder in a social system imposes limits on the reach of one's narrative as well as its epistemic power and political efficacy in social space. In this context of marginalization, it is as Alcoff explains, "The possibility of speaking for others bears crucially on the possibility of political effectivity. Both collective action and coalitions would seem to require the possibility of speaking for others" (Alcoff 1991, 11-12).

Thus, for social change nonprofit leaders the theoretical question of whether to speak for others has already been assumed by the work itself. The difficulty is not *whether* to speak for others, but *how*. In order to combat the various forms of exclusion Addams's worries about, narrative strategies must aim both to widen the reach of their constituents' stories out of the spaces where they have been relegated to, and to counter the harmful and stereotypical dominant narratives that are pervasively held about their constituents. Addams shows us how to bring Alcoff's interrogatory practices to life in a nuanced world where the problem of speaking for others is more than theoretical, but a lived problem that social change nonprofit professionals and activists must daily navigate (Alcoff 1991, 24-27).

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<sup>12</sup> Alcoff's formulation is, "The impetus to speak must be carefully analyzed and, in many cases (certainly for academics!), fought against" (Alcoff 1991, 24).

***(2) How does my own social standpoint bear on this occasion of speaking for my constituents, and have I safely avoided using it as an excuse for naïveté, ignorance, or insensitivity?***<sup>13</sup>

Addams's practice of constituent storytelling was based in an appreciation for the relationship between her social identity and her *epistemic standing*, that one can enjoy inflated or diminished epistemic authority as a result of her social identity (Davis, 2016; Fricker, 2007). Addams was aware that she had "credibility excess", that is, an inflated epistemic standing as a result of who she was (Davis 2016). Seigfried notes that Addams was, "far ahead of her time in her awareness of her own class and ethnic privilege and in her insights into how such privilege subtly undermines the dignity and effectiveness of the poor and working classes and less favored ethnic groups" (Seigfried 2002, xii).

The charity visitor regularly calls on a family whose head of household had recently been blacklisted in a strike. The story is largely told through the perspective of the fictional charity visitor, but not because Addams assumes the universality and objectivity of this perspective. Precisely the opposite. Addams reveals the charity visitor's biases and prejudices. The charity visitor "fails to have seen" the nuances of life in poverty (Addams 2002, 22). Her initial observation is that the head of household is lazy, the supportive wife is imprudent, the dress-buying daughter is vain, and the rowdy young boys of the neighborhood are criminals. But as the story persists, the fictional charity visitor's character develops towards a more structurally-situated, or "woke", conception of poverty. As the chapter progresses Addams idealizes the type of charity visitor who begins to move past moral imperialism to sympathetic understanding of the visiting family. She closes the chapter by narrowing in on the *humiliation process* that characterizes responsible social change work: "She reaches the old-time virtue of humility by a

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<sup>13</sup> Alcoff's formulation is, "We must also interrogate the bearing of our location and context on what it is we are saying, and this should be an explicit part of every serious discursive practice we engage in" (Alcoff 1991, 25).

social process, not in the old way, as the man who sits by the side of the road and puts dust upon his head, calling himself a contrite sinner, but she gets the dust upon her head because she has stumbled and fallen in the road through her efforts to push forward the mass, to march with her fellows. She has socialized her virtues not only through a social aim but by a social process” (Addams 1902, 33).

The fictional charity visitor’s journey is not without its failings, and importantly, Addams writes these failings into her stories of her constituents, either through fictional characters like the charity visitor, or in her own reflections back on herself and Hull House residents in other writings such as *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1910). Addams’s writes about the visited family *through the social perspective* of the fictional charity visitor, and this rhetorical framing of the discussion of poverty reveals the limitations of a privileged social perspective. Addams shows social change professionals the importance of naming and owning one’s own social perspective in constituent storytelling practices.

***(3) Who are my organization’s most marginal stakeholders, and how will I ensure my accountability to them?***<sup>14</sup>

Responsible constituent storytelling requires constant feedback loops with one’s constituents. Addams writes of her practice of always bringing a Hull House neighbor with her to speaking engagements (Addams 1910). It is important to note that Addams does not do this to appeal to the sympathies of benefactors for the Hull House organization, but rather, she writes about it as a way of holding herself accountable to responsible constituent storytelling.

The organizational mission of Hull House also facilitated this accountability. Under Addams’s leadership, the organizational philosophy of working *with not for* was a central,

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<sup>14</sup> Alcoff’s formulation is, “Speaking should always carry with it an accountability and responsibility for what one says (Alcoff 1991, 25-6).

guiding principle. Hull House was in one sense a service-provision organization. Like the charity visitor in *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902), Hull House residents regularly visited the homes of the most impoverished neighbors with charity baskets. But Hull House's mission extended beyond service-provision. It regularly hosted visits and lectures from scholars at the University of Chicago and leading thinkers in social science, evolutionary theorizing, and political theory, and in her autobiographical notes Addams recounts these courses in ways that reveal that course content, course content-presentation, and even course topic selection was largely what we would call "student-led" (Addams, 1910).<sup>15</sup> Recall that Hull House provided seed money and meeting space for neighbors engaged in collective action, and it hosted meetings between employers and laborers. Even its service provision practices were democratized programs that were neighbor-initiated and largely neighbor-run. Far more than a charitable organization, Hull House programming fostered avenues for civic engagement and empowerment and was largely directed by neighbors. It ultimately served as a forum for democratic participation.

***(4) What has the impact of my speech been, and could my constituents' stories have acquired epistemic standing and uptake without my mediation?***<sup>16</sup>

Addams relied on constituent storytelling as one tool for combatting the challenges that spatial stratification, subordinating structures, and epistemic exclusion impose on her rich conception of democracy as social ethics. Her arguments for economic and political reform in publications and speeches are almost always accompanied by the *stories* of marginalized people's experiences of industrial capitalism – the urban youth, the immigrant, the prostitute, or the factory worker.<sup>17</sup> In the discussion of the fictional charity visitor specifically, Addams

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<sup>15</sup> See especially Chapter 15: The Value of Social Clubs.

<sup>16</sup> Alcoff's formulation is, "One must look at where the speech goes and what it does there" (Alcoff 1991, 26).

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Addams's approach to social and political philosophy, a rhetorical approach that develops her argument in accompaniment with storytelling, is perhaps why many traditional philosophers have failed to identify her as a philosopher.

ultimately shows that the individualized charity model is insufficient for remedying the complex problems of poverty that emerge in industrial societies. In the process, she exposes and challenges assumptions about the poor and saviorist charity practices.

Importantly, Addams's arguments for social change are almost always storied arguments. She uses these stories to challenge stereotypes of immigrants and the poor in an effort to reconstruct dominant, prejudicial narratives. As Marilyn Fischer explains in her recent project to unpack Addams's method of ethical deliberation, "[Addams] was particularly concerned about attitudes toward recent immigrants whom members of the wealthier classes considered culturally, morally, and cognitively inferior to themselves" (2019, 65).<sup>18</sup> Besides challenging dominant narratives of the poor, at the time Addams's storied arguments challenged an emerging masculinization of social science that privileged abstract decision-making and a "detached, objective stance" (Fischer 2019, 165). Today, Addams's rhetorical practice of storied argument challenges traditional epistemological frameworks that privilege white, Anglo-centric modes of speaking.

Addams demonstrates the rhetorical dimensions of remedial interrogatory strategies for combatting epistemic exclusion. As I have highlighted, Addams does not analytically present her critical argument. Rather, Addams uses narrative form to demonstrate competing conceptions of how to relate with the poor, as well as to reveal the nagging perplexity around industrial poverty itself. And she tells constituent stories through the perspective of the charity visitor because this rhetorical framing preserves the awkwardness of encountering the Other and the unresolvable tensions of industrial poverty. The chapter not only provides a situated and sympathetic account

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<sup>18</sup> Seigfried also describes Addams as having spent a life filled with "unceasing efforts to explain the contributions of diverse ethnic groups to an American public that wanted to treat them as an undifferentiated underclass" (2002, xxxv).

of Addams's constituents, but it frames that account through the acknowledged social standpoint of a blundering, perplexed, and eventually somewhat more "woke" charity visitor. The argument in this particular passage of the fictional charity visitor – that we ought to move past a narrative of moralizing poverty to one of situating it in its industrial structural context – is a *storied* argument. That is, the reader is not beckoned to reason from premises towards a conclusion, but rather, to reason *through* a personal transformation of moving from white savior to fellow citizen, ally, and advocate.

Addams uses analogy and metaphor to disrupt the Otherness of the visited family and to broaden the "epistemic imaginary" of the dominant narrative constructions of her constituents (Dieleman 2012, 95). These rhetorical strategies both "show how restricted the scope of the dominant identities" really are and make space for recognizing "marginalized groups as members of "we" rather than "they"." (Walker 2007, 155; Dieleman 2012, 104) For example, Addams rhetorically de-Others urban youth through analogy, explaining that the thrill of being chased by the "coppers" is not unlike, "the practice of country boys who go forth in squads to set traps for rabbits or to round up a [rac]coon [sic.]" (Addams 1902, 26). Like many of the constituent stories Addams shares through the charity visitor's evolving perspective, Addams reframes the moralistic assumptions of privileged readers. We come to see the "juvenile crime" of immigrants as a natural and universal dimension of human development *that has been structurally criminalized*.<sup>19</sup>

Addams's conception of democracy as social ethics informed her philosophy of constituent relations and volunteer management. She regularly navigates the practical

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<sup>19</sup> It's worth noting that Addams was an active leader in the Playground Movement, and this story served not only to challenge contemporary stereotypes about the poor, but through that, to motivate readers to see playgrounds as a worthwhile public investment.

complexities of social change *work* in a way that enriches our appreciation for the nuances of speaking for others. Because of this, her work offers additional ways of thinking about remedial interrogatory practices, specifically for social change nonprofit professionals and activists. In sum, we learn from her that responsible constituent storytelling is a practice that emerges out of responsible social inquiry within democratic relations across difference, characterized by privileged people's active and non-paternalistic listening, epistemic patience, and epistemic humility.

### **Remedial Organizational Strategies for Institutionalizing Responsible Constituent Storytelling**

How does Addams help social change nonprofit professionals imagine and institutionalize organizational policies and cultures that can promote more responsible constituent storytelling?<sup>20</sup> Besides its facilitative rather than service-provision organizational mission, Addams and residents lived at Hull House. *They were neighbors*. The place-based and relational nature of Hull House with neighbors, as well as its dependency on neighbors for programming, was itself a source of organizational accountability. Unlike contemporary social change nonprofits that may center their mission around issues, problems, or the provision of certain services, Hull House's place-based mission enabled for deeper accountability and more genuine democratic responsiveness to constituents. Thus, the Hull House legacy challenges social change workers to critically consider how the contemporary professionalization of their

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<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that while Alcott does not articulate any remedial organizational strategies, she seems to suggest them in her example of Rigoberta Menchu's activism on behalf of and with indigenous Guatemalans. Alcott points to the social value of training constituents in resistance strategies and training constituents in the native tongue of their oppressors (Alcott 1991, 18-19). Additionally, Alcott draws attention to indigenous Guatemalans' non-hostile resistance of Menchu's Guatemalan village to gifts and resources that asserted needs on to the village, a practice which could be analyzed as an organizational remedial strategy for insulating an organization from saviorism in donor relations (Alcott 1991, 19).

practice can restrict the accountability that emerges more naturally in neighborhood relationships.

From an organizational perspective, the example of Hull House shows how organizational structures themselves can be remedial of the problem of speaking for others. That is, how an organization positions its constituents in relation to the organization (active participants or passive recipients), as well as how the organization position it's volunteers in relation to its constituents, can impact the way constituents perceive and tell their stories, as well as the kinds of stories that staff and volunteers take with them when they go home.<sup>21</sup>

Addams explains that among Hull House residents, there was always “the harrowing consciousness of the difference in economic condition” between residents and their constituents (Addams 1990, 133). Under her leadership, Hull House residents humbly asked, “Could we, in spite of this, make [neighbors’] individual efforts more effective through organization and possibly complement them by small efforts of our own?” (134)

In sum, two governing principles emerge from this analysis of Addams’s early model of constituent storytelling. First, Addams makes constituent *agency* central in her practice of constituent storytelling. Rather than focusing on what her organization is doing for neighbors, her stories focus on what constituents are doing with and for one another. In *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1910) especially, she frequently celebrates neighbors’ success at working across difference and creating anew in the midst of struggle. Hull House is merely the facilitator for

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<sup>21</sup> Future research might look to Hull House government and donor relations as potential institutional resources for responsible social change practice and narrative strategies. In what ways did Addams’s position as both the “Executive Director” of Hull House and President of the Hull House Board of Directors until her death, empower the Hull House organizational mission and programming? How did Addams’s vision for democratic community-based organizing impact the Hull House art school and its gallery displays, and what lessons can be drawn from this for contemporary concerns about colonizing narratives in Museums? (NPQ 2018a) What strategies did Addams’s use in donor relations to get endorsement and support for this place-based, social change organizational model, a model that I have suggested here enables for increased levels of organizational responsiveness, program adjustment, and constituent empowerment?

this, which brings us to the second important point. Not only does Addams's practice of constituent storytelling make constituent agency central, but it situates the storyteller's social perspective through calling out her own privileged social identity, as well as through drawing attention to the social failings that result from this privileged standpoint. Hull House *was* a facilitator for constituent agency and empowerment through community organizing, but Hull House organizational leaders were not without their failings in that process, and their social perspectives as economic and ethnic elites does not go unnamed!

Addams appreciates that in a social world where spatial stratification, participatory subordination, and epistemic exclusion impose constraints on the reach of marginalized people's stories, telling the stories of others sometimes emerges as a practical necessity, and even a moral obligation. Addams also teaches us that this practical necessity and moral obligation for social change nonprofit professionals and activists will inevitably be riddled with personal and organizational failures. Yet with epistemic humility about who we are, and with organizational intentionality, constituent storytelling can open spaces for inviting privileged publics into wider understanding of the social world, and into an acknowledgment of their interdependency with marginalized stakeholders under shared systems.

Addams shows that speaking for others entails *speaking for others through our own stories*. That is, responsible constituent storytelling names oneself as a speaker (and additionally describes one's own social standpoint in this rhetorical naming practice), and orients the story through one's own journey – riddled with failure and faulty assumptions – to become a *constituent neighbor*. Building from Addams's own examples, constituent stories must begin with the speaker's naiveties, perplexities, unsettlements, biases, and discomfort. We must be honest about our own perplexities, our values of digging deeper rather than explaining away, and

talk about how this willingness to fail publicly helps move us towards democratic relationships, richer understandings of one another and social problems, and new shared realities with diversely situated others.

There is still much to learn from Jane Addams and Hull House for contemporary social change nonprofit professional practice and activism, and more specifically for thinking about how organizational structures and program models can insulate us from the problems of saviorism and speaking for others, as well as for strategies for empowering constituents and affirming them as knowers and as *storytellers*. Addams reveals a new type of constituent storytelling for social change nonprofit professionals, a type of constituent story that demonstrates how owning our failures in the midst of persistent and invested democratic relationships can promote wider understanding and bring us into democratic *neighborship* with the Other across difference. We learn from Addams that responsible constituent storytelling is a practice that is both a kind of speaking for others, and a kind of speaking for oneself.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> For a contemporary example of this see Weaver 2017.

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