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“We Move Together¹” Reckoning with Disability Justice in Community Literacy Studies

Adam Hubrig

Abstract

This article centers *disability justice*, an ongoing and unfolding project of LGBTQA disabled BIPOC, to help understand and challenge the work of community literacy studies. By putting community literacy studies in conversation with disability justice through three themes—“Nothing About Us Without Us,” “Access is Love,” and “Solidarity Not Charity”—this essay moves to unpack how community literacy can resist not only ableism but also the interlocking systems of oppression which support it.

If you have seen me hobbling around at conferences with my cane—occasionally falling on my face—you might find me writing in response to a call for proposals about “where we stand” laughable as I can’t stand very well at all. I realize the call to address “where we stand” in community literacy didn’t intend ableism. But in a very serious sense, ableism, deeply interwoven with racism, misogyny, and other oppression, is historically embedded in the university and higher education structures and community literacy studies struggles with these complicated legacies.

But I’ve found something of a disciplinary home in community literacy studies. I say this hesitantly, acknowledging my ability to access this space is because of my whiteness and my academic training, and I actively work to change this for others. But at the same time, as a mobility impaired, disabled, autistic aspiring scholar and organizer, community literacy studies scholars have helped guide me in how to occupy an awkward space *between* community and university. Community literacy scholars and the wisdom they’ve shared have helped me make sense of this complicated positionality. For example, as I write, I am organizing with other disabled university students against a legislative bill in my home state of Nebraska that would encourage school teachers to use force and restraint on students—a move that the ACLU reports would disproportionately impact students of color and disabled students (Petto). This small step in a larger effort to combat injustices against disabled people is informed by community literacy work.

But—as a disabled person—I have also been guided by the ongoing efforts of disability justice activists, whose voices push me to interrogate my own whiteness and privilege within disabled communities. Disability justice is ongoing, led by disabled

1. From the words of Sins Invalid, outlining the importance of Collective Liberation: “We move together as people with mixed abilities, multiracial, multi-gendered, mixed class, across the sexual spectrum, with a vision that leaves no bodymind behind” (26).

people of color, disabled LGBTQA folks, and people from other multiply marginalized disabled backgrounds, which traces its intellectual and epistemological history to women of color—a point that cannot be stressed enough. As Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha reminds us, the intellectual labor and the politics of Black, Indigenous, and people of color are too-often watered-down or otherwise erased (“Dreaming” 20). I point specifically to the labor of *Sins Invalid*, a collective whose work continues to challenge me to more deeply, more meaningfully seek disability justice.

In this essay, I outline three areas where the work of disability justice and community literacy are in conversation—“Nothing About Us Without Us,” “Access is Love,” and “Solidarity Not Charity.” For me, these conversations—and the work of community literacy—are at once affirmed and contested through the epistemological frameworks of disability justice. In the words of *Sins Invalid*, “We can only truly understand ableism by tracing its connections to heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism” (18), and disability justice provides one way the field of community literacy studies might do so.

“Nothing About Us Without Us,” or Epistemological Ethics

In disability advocacy and activists spaces, the mantra “Nothing About Us Without Us” is a powerful demand to those in power. Coming from the coalition Disabled People South Africa (Piepzna-Samarasinha “Dreaming” 24), this mantra expresses how many disabled folks—like me—refuse to let others speak for them. One element of disability justice is *leadership by the most impacted*. “Ableism,” Piepzna-Samarasinha writes in her overview of the elements of disability justice, “exists in the context of other historical systemic oppression. We know to truly have liberation, we must be led by those who know the most about these systems and how they work” (“Dreaming” 27). Though I labor to help disabled folks organize around disability issues, I defer to the expertise of those living in my community who are multiply marginalized. Disability justice challenges the notions of what *counts* as expertise, what counts as knowledge.

Community literacy continues to grapple with issues of epistemological ethics. In their landmark essay “Community Literacy: A Rhetorical Model for Personal and Public Inquiry,” Higgins, Long, and Flower describe community literacy “as an affirmation of the social knowledge and rhetorical expertise of people in the urban community in which we worked, and as an assertion that literacy should be defined not merely as the receptive skill of reading, but as the public act of writing and taking social action” (9). Countering the normative, hegemonic logics of institutions (particularly universities where community literacy projects are often based) has been a focal point of community literacy ethical considerations. The decentering of institutional hegemony and its epistemologies is a central concern (for example, Holmes 152, Parks 192, Restaino 258, Feigenbaum 142, and Rousculp 124). Feigenbaum pointedly refers to this particular set of ethical considerations as an “anxiety about institutional colonialism” (124).

White settler colonialism is alive and well in the university in what Flower describes as the university's "tendency to co-opt and control" (Flower, *Community Literacy*, 27-28), not to ignore the fact that American universities are all built on stolen land. Vani Kannan et al remind us that "while community literacy/service learning work is framed in the rhetoric of social good, underlying these rhetorics are troubling patterns: missionary zeal, fixing others versus turning the gaze inward, whiteness, academic interests, privatization" (Kannan et al 79). This assumption of "social good," further examined in the following section "Solidarity not Charity," is continued colonization. Rachel Jackson and Kiowa Elder Dorothy Whitehorse DeLaune remind us that "Western literacy practices perpetuate western hegemony. In order to decolonize community writing in this academic context, we must listen—as invited by community members—to the story of Kiowa cultural literacy on Kiowa terms" (40). Their approach to community literacy centers Kiowa epistemology.

At its best, community literacy practices intercultural inquiry, recognizing other people's rich, experientially grounded *situated knowledge* (Flower, Higgins, Long 6). Flower describes how, when conducting intercultural inquiry with urban teenagers, they deny simplistic readings of their local contexts, refusing to accept simplistic labels of "gang" and "good kids," being more thoughtfully attuned to the actual material realities influencing the lived experiences of those impacted (Flower, Higgins, Long 73). This nuanced, localized understanding, Flower argues, is central to community engaged work "because plurality points us to the construction of more complex, connected, negotiated meanings" (Flower, Higgins, Long 78).

But seeking these "negotiated meanings" through deliberation can prove difficult when certain epistemologies are valued and others are not. For instance, in a community literacy project involving Sudanese refugees relocated to Phoenix, Long et al., Clifton, Alden and Holiday chronicle a sense of "institutional arrogance about which the Sudanese were so wary" (231). They describe how this sort of institutional arrogance which privileges the experiences and understandings of institutions often limits the rhetorical agency of community members within the framework of the partnerships. Steve Parks emphasizes this dimension of Community Literacy work in an interview published through his community press efforts. In the interview, Johnny Izizarry, a community organizer in Philadelphia, describes his experiences working with university scholars, "Working with universities was really frustrating because it was a lot of patronizing relationships. . . there's always this assumption that they know better when they sit at a table with us" (qtd. in Parks, 136). This persistent problem for community literacy work of arrogant, patronizing institutional attitudes is at the center of intercultural inquiry, challenging community literacy scholars to pick apart how "the system is rigged in favor of their [institutional] versions of intervention" (Long 201) and interrogate our own values and ideologies.

Together, these instances demonstrate institutional epistemological violence rooted in white supremacy. The disability justice movement began *in response* to a long history of centering *white* disabled narratives and the centering of white epistemologies in disability studies. Piepzna-Samarasinha helpfully critiques how *disability studies* has for too long been synonymous with *white*: "I am also aware how so much

writing about disability is limited to a white-dominated disability studies field and language, and how inaccessible to the vast majority of sick and disabled people who could potentially use it” (38). I see community literacy struggling with the same issue of whiteness, as exemplified by this moment from the first Conference on Community Writing:

“As an audience member pointed out during Eli Goldblatt’s keynote address at the inaugural Conference on Community Writing, the overwhelming majority of celebrated community literacy scholars and conference attendees are white, and the people of color often targeted in “community engagement” projects are almost entirely absent” (Kannan et al, 79).

At the 2019 Conference on Community Writing in Philadelphia, during an editor’s roundtable organized by Sherri Craig and Don Unger, conversations focused on the politics of citation and how *checkbox* approaches to diversity—for example, a book series thinking they’ve “accomplished” diversity because the series included a single book by a person of color—miss the point of social justice and ultimately uphold white supremacy.

“Access is Love,” or The Ongoing Process of Ensuring Accessibility

At the heart of community literacy and disability justice are concerns of *access*. One of my first introductions to disability justice was Alice Wong’s Disability Visibility Project, particularly “Access is Love,” a collaboration between Mia Mingus, Alice Wong, and Sandy Ho. Their collaboration has produced important resources—like an online guide to making conferences and other public spaces accessible and a suggested reading list on accessibility. In this campaign, organized and led by three disabled women of color, access is presented as an ongoing, continuously unfolding process: “Access should be a collective responsibility [. . .] It is all of our responsibility to think about and help create accessible spaces and community. [. . .] centering access as a core part of the way that we want to live in the world together—as a core part of our liberation” (Access is Love).

I am encouraged by the attention to accessibility mirrored in community literacy. Though I also have concerns and critiques, I see community literacy committed to accessibility and community literacy practitioners working to deconstruct barriers of all kinds. I see this commitment to access *not* simply in empty words, but in the workings of the Community Literacy Journal and the efforts of conference organizers.

Having served as a copy editor for the *Community Literacy Journal*, I am drawn to the journal’s dedication to a spirit of generosity in editorship: *CLJ* frequently works *with* the range of scholars who submit articles. In the event the editors don’t feel the manuscript is ready to print, they’ve worked closely with the authors to connect them to mentors interested in a similar niche of community literacy studies and often make those connections personally. I see this as another kind of *access*, working with scholars who are community members and tenured faculty alike, and put them in conversation with other community literacy practitioners.

Disability justice *demand*s access: describing the work of Creating Collective Access (CCA)—“a crip-femme-of-color made piece of brilliance” (48), Piepzna-Samarasinha describes how CCA challenged and transformed the inaccessibility of conferences spaces:

“We didn’t just survive the conference—we made powerful community. Committed to leaving no one behind, we rolled through the conference in a big, slow group of wheelchair users, cane users, and slow moving people [. . .] we were no longer willing to accept isolation, or a tiny bit of access, or being surrounded by white disabled folks as the only kind of disability community we could access” (“Dreaming” 51-52).

Piepzna-Samarasinha’s observations about CCA are reminiscent of the notorious inaccessibility of academic conference spaces. But this space of the conference also demonstrates how access issues are *more* than disability. Sherri Craig asks, for example, about how the conference experience of the Conference on Community Writing fails to engage black communities: “Who noticed that in all the places we all travelled across the first capital none encouraged us to engage with the predominantly Black community or asked us to face the reality of gentrification and homelessness around 30th Street Station and PHL, where many of us entered and departed?” (qtd in Hubrig et al, 6). Crafting spaces that don’t consider the experience of people of color, of women, of poor, LGBTQA, and other body minds considered non-normative is also an issue of access.

Drawing from the accessibility resources created by “Access is Love” and Sins Invalid, I am working as part of the upcoming 2021 Conference on Community Writing planning committee to make the conference more accessible for disabled body minds. But I appreciate how—in her original version of the conference—conference organizer Veronica House sought to make the conference accessible for those who *are not* academics, seeking to make the conference accessible to them.

Community literacy practitioners attend to a broad range of access—from secure access to food and water (House), to access to education and writing communities for incarcerated people (Jacobi), to access to basic needs and housing for people experiencing homelessness (Mathieu). Of course, food insecurity, incarceration, and homelessness *are also disability issues*, but disability justice is about addressing access by dismantling interlocking systems of oppression. Sins Invalid reminds us “able-bodied supremacy has been formed in relation to other systems of domination and exploitation. The histories of white supremacy and ableism are inextricably entwined, created in the context of colonial conquest and capitalist domination” (18). Seeking access means we seek to demolish the systems which create barriers.

“Solidarity not Charity,” or Networks of Reciprocity

Disability justice means careful attention to power relations and an active commitment to deconstructing oppressive power structures. Throughout *Care Work*, Piepzna-Samarasinha describes the role of care webs in disability justice. Piepzna-Samarasinha chronicles the sick and disabled QTBIPOC histories of care webs, the way

this labor has been on the backs of disabled femmes of color. Care webs are systems through which disabled folks *care for* each other. Importantly, care webs are radical in that they operate on the terms set by disabled body minds, “resisting the model of charity and gratitude, they are controlled by the needs and desires of the disabled people running them [. . .] from a model of *solidarity not charity*” (41, emphasis in the original). If you’re unfamiliar with critiques of charity by disabled—and BIPOC, poor, LGBTQA, and other marginalized—folks, part of the problem is charity tends to treat systemic injustices as problems faced by individuals while often assuming the moral inferiority of the person receiving charity (Piepzna-Samarasinha “Dreaming” 41). In terms of disability, specifically, Eli Clare describes “the charity model” of relating to disability: “The charity model declares disability to be a tragedy, a misfortune, that must be tempered or erased by generous giving” (361). “Solidarity not charity” requires careful attention to power dynamics and structural injustices.

Community literacy studies’ focus on *reciprocity* attends to similar power dynamics as a call to “solidarity not charity.” I find reciprocity *closely related* to epistemological ethics and issues of accessibility, and I am hopeful about the role building “networks of reciprocity” (Cushman 7) might continue to inform community literacy work. In their keyword essay on reciprocity for the *Community Literacy Journal*, Elisabeth Miller et al traces the use—and critiques of—reciprocity frameworks in Community Literacy studies: “much of the scholarship concerning community partnerships is still optimistic about the potential for developing reciprocal relationships” (174). To me, reciprocity rejects models of university community-engagement that suggests the university as a benevolent, morally superior institution *servicing* the community and bestowing its intellectual gifts. I have—in the parlance of my rural upbringing—seen how the sausage is made, and I’m unconvinced that institutions of higher education know what they’re doing and highly suspicious when those institutions suggest they know *what’s best* for a community—especially historically marginalized communities. Reciprocity demands ethical introspection into both the attitudes and assumptions that guide partnerships as well as the material realities that surround this work.

Like disability justice solidarity, reciprocity—at its best—resists charity models by interrogating the power dynamics involved in community literacy work. Ashley Holmes describes the importance of reciprocity, that it be a “self-critical focus on power relations” for all parties involved in the project (“Transformative” 61). But—though community literacy may well intend reciprocity—it often gets mangled in the neoliberal machinery of the university. Feigenbaum describes the difficulties of university and community reciprocity, noting the need to “negotiate higher education’s academic responsibility gap, which imposes bureaucratic, material, and political obstacles in the way of anyone seeking to cultivate egalitarian, reciprocal university partnerships” (125). In short, reciprocity is difficult because—too often—what is valued by those communities universities might partner with *are not* valued by those universities, and vice versa.

But—like solidarity—understanding reciprocity and what it can mean for community literacy is still more complicated. In “Unmasking Corporate-Military Struc-

ture: Four Theses,” for example, Vani Kannan et al interrogate the “campus/community binary,” where “community literacy” so often means white, university trained scholars (like myself) are taking *leadership* roles in communities they aren’t a part of, all while “university-based “community” programs espouse values of social justice, those same universities are becoming increasingly corporatized and militarized” (77). As disability justice has shown again and again how the labor of disabled people of color, particularly multiply marginalized people of color, is frequently erased in white disability organizing spaces, Kannan et al explore how this campus/community binary “inadvertently suggest[s] that those “in the community” do not study or work at the university or do not experience its economic, political, and cultural effects” (77) as well as how it erases the intellectual labor and traditions of scholars of color and those from other backgrounds for whom community has been a central concept. The campus/community binary too often ignores “knowledge that is explicitly valued and foregrounded in intellectual genealogies including Black feminism” (78). I still struggle with unpacking and understanding how reciprocity might complicate—and how as a framework it has already internalized—the campus/community binary.

I see community literacy struggling with this division and imagining how to build solidarity with marginalized communities in several sites. Tiffany Rousculp describes them as “misfires of good intentions” where “a partner (typically the institutional partner) falls into assumptions about what is “good for” those whom the project is intended to empower, and takes ownership over the writing produced within them” (120). Too often, the institution and those that serve them seek ownership of the partnership. Reciprocity means challenging concepts and confines of ownership. In *Rewriting Partnerships*, Rachael Shah shares a number of practices—including advisory boards, participatory evaluation, and community grading (181)—meant to destabilize institutional ownership and work toward reciprocity. She posits that practices like these that shift ownership and agency in the partnership—or reciprocity “with teeth” (174)—can reconfigure and transform how literacy partnerships work, not only for single scholars and departments, but for the entire discipline of community literacy (181).

Piezna-Samarasinha articulates how, when providing access, institutions often revert back to the “charity model once again — *Look at what we’re doing for you people! Aren’t you grateful?* No one likes to be included as a favor. Inclusion without power or leadership is tokenism” (“To Survive”). The best iterations of reciprocity in community literacy work to resist these “charitable” impulses, to build real solidarity through literacy work.

Disability Justice Informed Community Literacy

I return to the challenge of this article, the challenge to articulate *where community literacy stands*. I have tried to show what it is about community literacy work that makes me hopeful, that encourages me to hobble forward in an attempt to create new partnerships that might dismantle the power structures that threaten disabled people and other marginalized communities.

But I continue to struggle with balancing—in her 2019 Conference on Community Writing keynote address, Carmen Kynard refers to as *the job* and *the work*. “The work” refers to the organizing, working alongside my beloved disabled community to challenge systemic inequalities. “The job” refers to, well, this labor, the “scholarship.” I reckon with the words of Sins Invalid responding to these concerns: “We must recognize that some forms of labor have been overvalued, while others are ignored due to their association with marginalized people’s bodies and work. What does it mean to actively take stock of our capacities, our bodies, and our relationships to institutional power in relation to each other?” (66). I struggle to interrogate the ways the job dictates that I pursue “academic capital,” that is “publication and professionalization [that] both domesticates and depoliticizes critical interventions born of embodied struggle” (Kannan et al 79). As I continue to understand community literacy, I continue to reckon with the colonialist, white supremacist weaponized deployment of literacy to uphold oppressive systems—such as the normative literacy practices outlined by Pritchard that are used “to regulate the sexuality of Black people, particularly nonnormative Black subjects” (27). For me, the challenges posed by BIPOC disabled disability justice activists complicates, challenges, and pushes forward some of the central conversations happening in community literacy studies—at times affirming and frequently challenging our work. I have no answers raised by the ongoing and unfolding conversations about epistemology, access, and reciprocity, but I am certain being attentive to these conversations helps me hobble toward a more just realization of community literacy.

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