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The Promising and Challenging Present of Community Literacy

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Editors' Introduction

The Promising and Challenging Present of Community Literacy

Paul Feigenbaum and Veronica House

On the *Community Literacy Journal (CLJ)* website, we have expanded the definition of community literacy from the already forward-thinking and expansive definition offered by the journal's founding editors, Michael Moore and John Warnock. We've done this to accommodate and include the vast representations of literacy we see across multiple domains beyond mainstream educational and work institutions. Under this wide umbrella, according to the journal website's revised definition, community literacy

can be found in programs devoted to adult education, early childhood education, reading initiatives, or work with marginalized populations, but it can also be found in more informal, *ad hoc* projects, including creative writing, graffiti art, protest songwriting, and social media campaigns. For us, literacy is defined as the realm where attention is paid not just to content or to knowledge but to the symbolic means by which it is represented and used. Thus, literacy makes reference not just to letters and to text but to other multimodal, technological, and embodied representations, as well. Community literacy is interdisciplinary and intersectional in nature, drawing from rhetoric and composition, communication, literacy studies, English studies, gender studies, race and ethnic studies, environmental studies, critical theory, linguistics, cultural studies, education, and more.

With more practitioners at faculty and graduate levels, the praxis of community literacy no longer occupies such a marginalized space within the broader field of rhetoric and composition. In fact, the successes of the 2015 and 2017 Conferences on Community Writing, which had respectively 350 and 436 attendees, raised broad interest in funneling that excitement, energy, and drive into an official organization for community literacy. As this organization, the Coalition for Community Writing, takes shape, the *Community Literacy Journal* will become an affiliated journal.

But with this growth come even more of the challenges that practitioners have been thinking through and discussing for years, often in the pages of the *CLJ*. These challenges include the costs and benefits of institutionalization, or what it means — to paraphrase from Paula Mathieu's now canonical book, *Tactics of Hope* — when previously tactical approaches evolve into strategic infrastructures. There are also the psychosocial implications of investing both our minds and our hearts into supporting social change while being continually reminded that the institutions we represent may reinforce the status quo. It has become increasingly clear to us that the experiences of failure and even *burnout*—that state where we must step back from

the work—might be inevitable components of this praxis, which are points echoed in various chapters of Jessica Restaino and Laurie Cella’s collection *Unsustainable*. In fact, the frequency of burnout has contributed to a new emphasis on contemplative pedagogy, mindfulness, and self-care in community literacy scholarship and practice (Briggs and Mathieu; Godbee).

These material, political, ethical, cognitive, and affective growing pains reflect the experiences of engaged scholars throughout higher education, which has led some to call for dialing back, or even ceasing, the pursuit of community-university partnerships (Stoecker). Within community literacy, the development of best practices and principles such as egalitarianism and reciprocity have emerged alongside the understanding that no matter how thoughtful we are about how we engage community partners, unintended negative consequences can – and at times will – occur. Positioning our practices within the rhetorical ecology of community literacy, interrogating how power imbalances and implicit biases manifest in relationships, and facing the implications of austerity capitalism are all critically important components of this work. At the same time, this self-analytical work, and the misgivings and skepticism about engagement it can engender, can be debilitating for university practitioners and condescending to community partners, whose experiences we sometimes wrongly anticipate. We suspect that, in many cases, community representatives are savvier about the ethical complexities academics face than we give them credit for. We must be self-aware, and we must regularly revisit both our positionality and the dynamic ethical complications of our partnerships. But when *we* decide *on behalf of* a community whether or not we are exploiting it, we re-inscribe the same power dynamics we seek to level. In spite of these persistent structural power imbalances, important work is being done. The hundreds of participants at both Conferences on Community Writing are a testament to this, and the energy and excitement at these conferences suggest the vibrancy of, and necessity for, community literacy. It is this kind of work, and the countless projects we have yet to encounter, that we look forward to discovering and publishing.

As we complete the transition in editorship, we are adding several new sections in order to showcase innovation and challenges in a variety of areas. First, we plan to regularly include an interview with an engaged scholar, teacher, or activist in order to highlight and celebrate the variety of work occurring in the field of community literacy. Another key goal for us as editors is to find ways to increase circulation of the journal to non-academic audiences and to publish writing by those audiences. To these ends, we have added two sections that we hope will encourage writing not only from community-engaged scholars and teachers but from non-profit staff and community-based activists. The first is called Community Literacy Project and Program Profiles, which will showcase innovative and impactful community-based projects and programs that are grounded in best practices. The second is called Issues in Community Literacy, which will offer targeted analysis, reflection, and/or complication of ongoing challenges associated with the work of community literacy. We imagine this as a space for practitioners to raise critical issues or to offer a response to an issue raised in a previous volume of the *CLJ*.

We are proud to publish examples of these new sections alongside the Article and Book Review sections that are carrying over from the previous editorship. To mark the transition from the founding editors, Michael Moore and John Warnock, we are thrilled to publish our interview with them, in which they share anecdotes and insights about the founding of the journal, the development of the field, and some of the joys of editorship.

We are also pleased to print Ellen Cushman's keynote address from the 2017 Conference on Community Writing, "Place and Relationships in Community Writing." The Cherokee word for school, ᏚᏍᏗᏅᏍᏗ (dideloquasdi), Cushman tells us, roughly translates to "the place where they learn." It illustrates two concepts key to the learning that unfolds in community writing projects: place and relationships. In this address, Cushman draws on a number of Cherokee precepts that help us understand how place and relationships factor centrally into community writing projects and classrooms. Community writing as a field pays particularly close attention to relationships and place, or networks and ecologies, in efforts designed to help communities and students write themselves together. Where we learn together, Cushman argues, we create peoplehood and perseverance. She suggests ways in which the concept of civic sustainability may offer an avenue for redressing divisive public and classroom discourse.

Elaine Richardson and Alice Ragland's article "#StayWoke: The Language and Literacies of #BlackLivesMatter," examines the language, literacies, and rhetorical practices of the Black Lives Matter movement in its extension of Black and African American language traditions and prior liberation movements. Richardson and Ragland first situate the movement's emergence amid the ongoing struggle of Black people to have their humanity and human rights fully recognized and respected both systemically and amid the individual encounters with authority figures, and sometimes vigilantes, that all too often become life-and-death matters. Focusing on a remarkable range of genres, modes, mediums, and performances of texts, Richardson and Ragland demonstrate the rhetorical and linguistic versatility and inclusivity of the movement. In these many ways, the authors argue, the language and literacies of Black Lives Matter promote the value of all black lives.

Our Community Literacy Project and Program Profile is "The CitiZINE Project: Reflections on a Political Engagement Project," in which Lesley Graybeal and Kristen Spickard present an innovative effort to encourage public discourse about politics. Engaging students and community members in and around the University of Central Arkansas, the CitiZINE Project comprised a series of zinefests connected to the most recent presidential inauguration. Zines have become an increasingly prevalent genre among community literacy practitioners in recent years, and this piece demonstrates how, in an age dominated by bitter partisan divides, zines offer a way for people to express their opinions creatively and with little rancor on political topics.

In our Issues in Community Literacy piece, "Intentionally Public, Intentionally Private: Gender Non-Binary Youth on Tumblr and the Queering of Community Literacy Research," Megan Opperman challenges heteronormative conventions regarding research on human subjects. This argument emerges from Opperman's own expe-

riences researching the social media practices of gender non-binary youth. Observing that members of this community use Tumblr in multi-layered ways that can be simultaneously private and public, Opperman contends that scholars seeking to work with this community must queer their research methodologies, and she offers examples of what this queering looks like in her own research practices.

We are also pleased to include six Book and New Media reviews, which we hope will inspire some good reading! We are grateful to Jessica Shumake and Saul Hernandez for continuing on as the *Community Literacy Journal's* Book and New Media Review editors.

Finally, in our commitment to supporting not only seasoned scholars, but also community-based writers and rising scholars, we have adopted a guiding editorial philosophy of *rigorous generosity*, a term coined by Jenn Fishman during a conversation at the 2017 Conference on Community Writing. The basic principle of rigorous generosity, which we see as another carry over from the founding editors, is that if authors are submitting compelling, groundbreaking work that fits the mission of the journal, we want to work with them, even if that means that the process of moving from initial submission to publication-ready article takes time and potentially multiple revisions. We have learned from Michael Moore and John Warnock that to a large extent being an effective editor means being a mentor, especially to graduate students and junior faculty. In their interview, Michael and John emphasized that the *CLJ* has traditionally been a launching pad for the scholarship of many graduate students and early-career scholars (including incoming co-editor Paul Feigenbaum, whose first full-length, peer-reviewed article appeared in the *CLJ* and whose confidence that he could do this work grew considerably as a result). We look forward to continuing this tradition.

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