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Challenging How English Is Done: Engaging the Ethical and the Human in a Community Literacies Seminar

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Challenging How English Is Done: Engaging the Ethical and the Human in a Community Literacies Seminar

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Or it is confessional, sensational, and graphic but goes little further than rendering scenes in distressingly harsh detail. They begin by recording experience, to the point where there is only circumstantial detail, with little or no broader audience appeal or larger idea. The next level of writing—which begins with a deep engagement with the subject—begins to examine a theme or idea and is a big step and depends in part on levels of reading, education, awareness of a worldview or vision. The bigger ideas, the context, the overlap with an outside reader's world seem unnecessary or unworthy of consideration. The learning curve for these men is steep. Sometimes, in a matter of months, they write with greater maturity, precision, and honesty. They hear, in the other men's work, real effort to capture experience through well-chosen, independent, fresh, well-earned language.

They have to grow beyond embryonic ideas of what good writing is and how much work it takes to shape and share a complex thought. I realize that I am talking to myself when talking to them. I see that what needs to be said in my own life is the hard stuff—my fears, anger, and sense of injustice. It takes so much energy to keep that repressed, bottled up, confined. I have begun that process but have not finished. There is work to be done. It begins with invitation, leads to listening, and then progresses to the craft of shaping for oneself and for a reader. It is one thing to be heard, another to be understood.

When I reload the Subaru and head back toward the city, I remember that when I began to write, I found someone inside myself I did not previously know. The words led to ideas, strung together an identity, spoke taboos, and affirmed beliefs. The words took on a life of their own when put to paper. They made some of the darkness conscious. It is the words wrung from darkness that I trust when I go to the prison or to the classroom. With some respect, skill, and something to say, students and inmates might find a way to save us from ourselves.

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Author Bio

Erec Toso teaches in the Writing Program at the University of Arizona. His first memoir, *Zero at the Bone – Rewriting Life After a Snakebite* was published in 2007. He was has published essays in *The Sun – A Magazine of Ideas*, *The Briar Cliff Review, Northern Lights*, and has published book reviews in *Rhetoric Review*. He runs prison writing workshops at the Arizona State Prison, Tucson Complex.

Challenging How English Is Done: Engaging the Ethical and the Human in a Community Literacies Seminar

Susan Weinstein, Jeremy Cornelius, Shannon Kenny, Muriel Leung, Grace Shuyi Liew, Kieran Lyons, Alejandra Torres, Matthew Tougas, and Sarah Webb

Abstract

Eight English graduate students and a professor reflect on their semester-long exploration of community literacy studies. The students, some in a MFA Creative Writing program and some doing doctoral work in literature, rhetoric, or English Education, discuss how the community literacies lens unsettled their relationship to English Studies.

Background

In 2008, Fero et al. published an article titled "A Reflection on Teaching and Learning in a Community Literacies Graduate course" in this journal about the experience of teaching and learning in a seminar on community literacy practices, designed for a new graduate concentration in Rhetoric and Writing at Michigan State University (82). A second case study, "Community Engagement in a Graduate-Level Community Literacy Course", appeared in *CLJ* in 2014, and described a seminar designed for a graduate program in Rhetoric and Technical Communication at Michigan Technological University (Bowen et al. 18). Each of these texts offered a model for the community literacy seminar, while also pointing to the particular challenges involved in connecting university programs and graduate students to community spaces.

When I contacted *Community Literacy Journal* editor Michael Moore in the summer of 2015 to ask about ways of connecting my planned Fall 2015 community literacies seminar to the journal's work, his immediate suggestion was to build on the work of Fero et al. and Bowen et al. by contributing a third seminar case study. This article, then, represents the results of that study and expands the dialogue by centering a seminar *not* situated within a Rhetoric/Writing/Communications

program and *not* populated solely by graduate students studying under such a rubric. Researching Community Literacies, the course this article describes, took place at Louisiana State University in Fall 2015 within a traditional English department with a large literature concentration, a well-known MFA Creative Writing program, and a smaller concentration at the graduate level in Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture (RWC). The eleven student participants in the seminar came from across those concentrations—five were MFA students in either poetry or fiction, three were doctoral students in literature, and two were doctoral students in RWC. The class also included one PhD candidate from Education.

The present article asks what it means for community literacy studies to "travel" outside of writing studies, to be taken up by graduate students who want to explore what it would mean to engage with people and practices beyond the academy as a part of their work in creative writing, literary studies, queer studies, and postcolonial studies—some of the areas represented by the students in our seminar. What does it mean for community literacy studies, and what does it mean for a largely traditional, literature-centric university English program, for its graduate students to be invited into the distinct way of imagining scholarly and creative work that a study of community literacies engenders? To address these questions, and following a brief seminar description, the rest of this article is organized thematically. During our last class meeting in the fall, as each student described their research project, I took notes on the themes I heard coming up within and across presentations. I shared these back to the students, and we revised them together to create the format for the following sections. In each, one or more students reflect on the way the particular themes played out in their research.

Seminar Description (Sue)

LSU English is a large department in a research university that is also the flagship state university. It's the former home of the storied Southern Review literary journal, and literary studies—particularly southern literature—has long been central to the department's identity. Graduate students in the department focus on a range of areas within literature; rhetoric, writing, and culture (RWC); and creative writing, in which we offer a terminal MFA. The MFA is a three-year program requiring substantial academic study in English alongside writing workshops, so graduate seminars in English include a mixture of students, some pursuing the MFA and some the PhD.

My own research field is New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Gee, 1996; Street, 1985), which views literacy practices as always already ideological, and that, therefore, calls for studies of socially situated engagement with verbal texts that attend to the power dynamics inherent in those situations. Most graduate students taking my seminars are new to both NLS and to conducting research with human subjects, to use the clinical language of the IRB. My challenge is to offer a balance of material that introduces students to the field of NLS, while also leaving space to investigate a particular set of questions and for students to develop seminar projects that speak to their larger academic and creative interests.

The seminar that is the focus of this article took place in Fall 2015, and was titled "Researching Community Literacies." In the past, I have only attempted a methodological focus once in a seminar because the students come in with so little experience and because ethnographic methods are complex, varied, and require more than a single semester of study. Yet I knew we had a number of graduate students who wanted to get off campus and connect with community spaces. The syllabus that resulted attempted to do a few things: 1) provide an intensive orientation to qualitative research ethics; 2) offer an introduction to research methodologies; 3) trace a broad historical trajectory of literacy studies, including community literacy studies; and 4) include multiple and diverse examples of community literacy research. Since I had the good fortune to already know most of the students registered for the seminar, I selected readings that would skew to their interests, and this is a key way that the seminar differed from those described by Fero et al. and Bowen et al. While our early semester readings included two critical community literacy text, Elenore Long's *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics* and Higgins, Long, & Flower's "Community Literacy: A Rhetorical Model for Personal and Public Inquiry," we quickly branched out into a number of related but distinct fields that reflected the interdisciplinarity of our group. I chose to include readings from performance studies because it is a field that can serve as a connector between the qualitative and the literary/creative, growing as it does out of both the consciously heightened performance of theater and Erving Goffman's study of "the presentation of self in everyday life," to borrow the title of his 1959 book. Several articles from rhetoric and culture scholar Phaedra Pezzullo (2003a, 2003b) offered a useful author study for our seminar, given that one study took place in southeastern Louisiana and that much of her work reflects the complexities of participant-observation and of activist scholarship.

Despite some disciplinary departures from the two earlier seminars documented in *CLJ*, and specifically because most of the participants had no experience with either the field of community literacy studies or with researching with human subjects, our early class meetings took up the very questions with which the 2008 Fero et al. study begins:

1. What is a community?

2. What is literacy?

3. What, therefore, is community literacy?

4. What does it mean to practice community literacy—to write, to teach, to learn, and so on? (83)

Indeed, our first class meeting saw participants breaking into small groups to attempt an answer to those first two questions, brainstorming and recording ideas on large sheets of paper that we then posted and discussed at length.

The other major consideration for the course design was the research component. Cushman and Grabill, as the professors of the Michigan State seminar, opted not to require participants to conduct research in community spaces during the course of their seminar, but questioned that choice in the Fero et al. article:

> We thought carefully about this, but one of us (Jeff) was insistent—perhaps too insistent—that any work outside the university be linked to existing work and relationships. We did not want to send our graduate student colleagues forth to volunteer or design a study or engage in work that was not already part of an existing relationship. This made the course perhaps too conceptual in its conduct. […] Therefore, we left one key tension untouched—the tension between our often elegant theories of what communities are, what literacy should be, and how we ought to design our activities and the less-than-ideal
>
> realities of literacy projects. (90)

Designing her Michigan Tech seminar several years later, Bowen took heed of Cushman and Grabill's self-critique and required seminar students to participate in Breaking Digital Barriers (BDB), a volunteer-based community program with which Bowen was already involved. Her students split their time with BDB between working with program attendees and taking field notes for research. Ultimately, that research led them to design and facilitate several workshops in addition to BDB's regular offerings (21).

In Baton Rouge, I work with several community youth organizations, but none is structured in a way that would have allowed for all eleven graduate students to participate in a single program the way Bowen's students did with Breaking Digital Barriers. Each student in the LSU seminar, then, was required to identify a research project of their own involving a specific community of practice. This broadened the definition of community literacies from the strictly service-oriented to include practice-oriented spaces. Despite Long's hesitance around researching online communities (11-12), which seminar participant Sarah Webb takes up further on in this article, we chose to include digital communities as an option for research. This option was helpful given the wide variety of disciplines and fields of study among the seminar students, and also ensured that students who lacked experience with community service spaces and who might not be productive within those spaces could meet the course requirements while avoiding harm to themselves or others. I further attempted to mitigate risk by focusing the first several weeks of the semester on research ethics. Students had to complete the NIH training for conducting research with human subjects that LSU's IRB requires of its researchers, and we read

several articles from Paris and Winn's *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities* (2013).

Finally, fresh off a week-long summer Critical Participatory Action Research Institute at CUNY Graduate Center's Public Science Institute, I encouraged students to consider forms of publication instead of, or in addition to, the traditional academic essay. While I acknowledge the continued primacy of the academic essay in English studies and do not want to hamper graduate students' chances on the job market, I am energized by the power of alternative forms of publication used by activists and artists in order to reach a variety of audiences and to reinforce the content of their work.

In the following section, seminar students describe and reflect on several elements of their experience researching community literacies. Following the overall purpose of this article, which is to consider how and to what extent community literacy studies can challenge traditional graduate English practices, we focus on themes of challenge: to our pre-existing assumptions about what academic research looks like and how it is conducted, to our understandings of our own positions in the various communities we inhabit, and to our sense of the purpose of scholarship in the world.

Thematic strands

Challenging pre-existing expectations

Alex: When I registered for the seminar, I decided to get a head start on my research and conduct a study on the reading practices and attitudes of the child participants in a Vacation Bible School summer program in my hometown church community. My original study focused on how reading is used in the program, especially during the program's one-on-one reading portion. After transcribing interviews, coding and organizing data, the findings were not surprising. The youths' perceptions of their reading and writing abilities largely rested on what feedback they received in school. Throughout the seminar, I found myself thinking and talking more about my positionality as a researcher, participant, and member. The project became less about the reading practices of members in the community and became more about my positionality as a relocated member returning to do research in my hometown community. I found that researchers as participants and members can use their positionality to think critically about the different layers within their communities.

Jeremy: When beginning the project for class, I knew that I was interested in focusing on zines in some way, but my focus was extremely broad because zines and zine cultures boldly engage in intersectional politics, so I was stumbling to find a specific focus. In-class discussions influenced me to approach the project through ethnographic methods, which meant completing the IRB process and deciding who to interview. I decided to broadly ask the question: "Where are the zines?" in order to explore if and where zinesters are still actively crafting zines and engaging in radical

activist work. I chose two current young zinesters—one from the POC zine project and one who recently started making her own zine; a zine archivist who runs the Queer Zine Archive Project based in Milwaukee; a former zinester and current visual and comic artist; and an academic who currently studies grrrl zines. The end result took the form of a hybrid zine with creative theorizing to form a genealogy of zine cultures that incorporated my own poetry alongside interview excerpts and queer theory.

Grace: My primary research interests at the beginning of the semester were in the areas of racial segregation and racism in the community of contemporary poetry. Many recent high-profile events, alongside the pandemic lack of visibility of poets of color and of divergent identities, demonstrated how the white institution of contemporary poetry failed to extend its project to consider the racialized and gendered dimensions of the creation of poetry. Why is it important, if not fundamentally necessary, to intersect discussions of race, class, gender, and other identitarian aspects within spaces of art and creative writing? What might such discussions even look like? What happens when theoretical aestheticizations within the academy collide with the practical realities of institutional power imbalances? Who are the parties most affected and how are they pooling their voices together and pushing back? Where do these conversations usually happen? How have such conversations reshaped the kind of poetry being read, written, and disseminated?

Among the impetuses for this project were our class discussions about blurring the line between theory and praxis and between the academic and political. My initial proposal was to collect original and existing interviews with poets whose publications and public lives were intertwined with literary activism. As the semester continued, I became further drawn to the interdisciplinary nature of the seminar. Borrowing from performance theory and affect theory, I gravitated toward constructing a solid theoretical grounding for some of the questions I posed at the beginning of the seminar.

Muriel: At the beginning of the course, I wanted to explore the conversations emerging in light of several recent politically charged moments in literary politics. As a creative writer, I feel a particular stake in this inquiry as I have often felt a lack of centralized dialogue around these issues. Thus, I sought out several writers whose politics are notably central to their creative work to help answer questions about what it means to be a socially and politically involved writer. However, the content of my interviews with them turned out to be different than anticipated. The recurrent concern across all interviews seem to be a desire for these poets to affirm their creative work in poetry as a legitimate form of labor. Although this focus on poetic labor was not the initial inquiry for this project, I have realized that an investigation of what *work* means in artistic production provides an effective entry point into the greater dialogue of what it means to be a socially and politically engaged artist.

Shannon: From the start of my project, I wasn't quite certain how I would contextualize my findings. My initial idea was to conduct interviews with poets from various communities, asking how they thought their work interacted with the larger world. This was done partly in the interest of my own development, as a way for me to think about how other creative writers were moving through different literary/non literary spheres. And, I wanted to make this information available to those similarly contemplating these questions, as well as analyze how poets viewed themselves as agents towards a goal of change.

Initially, I believed a final paper rife with my own thoughts and opinions would be the best format to tackle this endeavor. But, in the seminar, we discussed how speaking for others becomes a trope of academic discourse, a way to elevate your own opinion or worldview above those who are kind enough to participate in research. When I started to think more concretely about a finalized project, nothing seemed quite right in terms of me gathering data and synthesizing that information through specific lenses. These people were complicated, branching out in tangled directions; the "goals" I had anticipated were more multi-faceted than I'd first perceived them to be, which should have come as no surprise, considering my own scattered relation to the poetry world and how I want to exist within it.

And so, what came out was shaped by my time in Community Literacies, through our conversations around positionality and power hierarchies in academia and other institutional settings. I write, as a small tangent to the introduction of my piece, "I don't want to speak for you. I want to listen. I want to engage. I want to learn. I want to create" (Kenny). The collaborative nature of my project, which pulls from the interviews I conducted to create a digital landscape—a mockup of a website with question-framed forums that have these voices interacting—was birthed from the concepts inherent to our class and how we continuously learned to be aware researchers in an intricate world.

Challenging Academic Publication

Grace: I will be presenting an adapted version of my paper at the 2016 Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS) conference, on a panel titled "Reconciling The Ties That Bind: Aesthetic Innovations and Performing Race in Poetry." In an effort to form a discussion panel that is more collaborative than incidental, I will use the research paper produced through this seminar as a foundation for looking at racial performativity, and adapt it for the panel presentation to include textual and contextual analyses of poets such as Bhanu Kapil and Theresa Hak-Kyung Cha. The panel will, collaboratively, offer a mode of critique that centers race and maintains its primacy in poetry beyond the aesthetic categories dictated primarily by a canon that maintains the "universality" of whiteness.

Muriel: I expressed to Dr. Weinstein in the beginning of the course, as well as to my interviewees, that my goal for this project is to participate in the larger discussion of what it means to be a socially and politically engaged writer. This purpose necessitates publication in a public literary forum with a precedent for publishing essays that critique issues within various literary communities. It is important that my writing is not regarded as "new" but rather as an extension of a dialogue that has been going on for a very long time.

While the final product for the seminar was a hybrid personal and critical essay, I am interested in further experimenting with the formal expectations of academic writing through a blend of lyric essay and poetry forms to communicate the richness of my interviewees' voices as well as my own. I find that experimentation with form and genre is especially necessary for this project as it asks questions about power and authority, notions of which become distorted when boundaries between forms and genres are blurred. Experimenting with the form and presentation of this research also requires me to critique what it means to present a collective voice, to articulate experiences and ideas that occur among poets of color. Play with form can perhaps invite a way for a collective voice to exist while also problematizing any tendency towards essentializing these experiences. Hopefully, it will also allow me to explore ways to place myself within this conversation as a poet of color and a researcher.

Shannon: The poets I interviewed for my research discussed the idea of accessibility, of making information and creative work available to a wider audience. I wanted my project to engage in that accessibility, branching out from mere fodder for other researchers to pick at. What emerged was a website mock-up—a place where poets, writers, and inter-textual artists discussed their process, writing as a medium, and the ways they see their work moving in the world. Each section asked certain questions, and the poets whom I interviewed addressed subjects related to these questions. I also included some of the creative work these artists generated, as well as my own work, to connect perceptions of creativity and creative process to the product itself, and to put myself in the conversation as opposed to positioning myself as an elevated arbiter. Theoretical frameworks—snippets from books which deal with these questions—were also sprinkled through certain sections, to show that academic discourse and this type of experimental format don't have to be at odds.

Challenging the role of researcher

Sarah: Because I chose to study an issue that I am personally and professionally committed to as an activist, I was concerned about confirmation bias. During an in-class discussion about the project, the group offered a couple of strategies for addressing this concern. The first was to acknowledge my positionality and include a transparent analysis of it as part of my project. The second suggestion was to compensate for potential confirmation bias by collaborating with other colleagues.

The second option would have been ideal, but was not feasible given the remaining time left in the semester. The first option proved to be a workable solution. Within my own findings, I was also assured that confirmation bias was at least mitigated because the data actually contradicted many of the common assumptions and tropes with which I was familiar.

Alex: My positionality as a participant and member of the community became a larger focus of my project than I had anticipated. During interviews, I was aware of it as a limitation. Since I was in a teacher role, the children might have felt that they had to provide the "right" answer. Although some of the teens had known me for several years, my older age and the fact that they knew I was conducting research could have made them feel like they also had to provide the "right" answer. I was also made aware of my positionality through the manner in which I was introduced to new members. I was framed as a community role model because I had completed college and am attending graduate school, and in passing comments, I was praised for not being a young unwed mother and for continuing to return to volunteer. But in positioning me as a role model, people didn't take into consideration the special circumstances that enabled me to be a high achiever. I had more privilege than the many undocumented members of my community. I possessed a social security number, which allowed me to qualify for in-state tuition and to receive academic scholarships. By celebrating my academic privilege, in fact, people were devaluing the young single mothers in our community who were working towards or had completed bachelor's degrees. Positioning me as the role model was also problematic in that it reinforced the myth that, with a little hard work and determination, all dreams can come true. In fact, I fear that some members of the community do not fully understand that we should be questioning the institutions that make it nearly impossible for more brown youth to attend college. Instead of praising one member who managed to find a way around systemic hurdles, we should be collectively thinking of ways to ensure that all community members can excel.

Kieran: My greatest regret regarding this project is not that I did not finish everything I intended to—I can complete that research later—but that what I did produce ended up looking little different from a standard English seminar paper. I found myself adopting the impersonal, authorial "I" and supposedly objective eye characteristic of much writing in the humanities. This persona possesses opinions, even interests, but does not feel his own emotions worthy of inclusion, though in reality I found researching and writing about euthanasia, the discourse of animal shelters, and the community of workers who inhabit such spaces upsetting and disheartening. I also found myself writing about communities about which I had little firsthand knowledge. Writing about these organizations' websites without speaking to and observing their members is a little like describing the culture of a city by examining a tourism poster. I suppose this is a testament to the difficulty of setting

aside habitual scholarly approaches, especially when they are taught and rewarded by most of the academy.

Jeremy: I have been involved with zines and zinefests for a few years, and I was delighted at the opportunity to think about them in an academic space because of their critiques of power and privilege. However, as a researcher, I felt the need to be aware of my own position as a graduate student with a particularly privileged platform and voice as white, cis-gendered, and male-appearing. In previous conversations with zinesters, I was an active participant, but in my research, I wanted to be careful about what I was adding during the interviews because I really wanted to hear different perspectives on zines and zine communities without imposing my own perspective. At the same time, in crafting the zine I produced for my final seminar project, I was able to put my own perspective in dialogue with their interviews, primarily through poetry.

Matthew: The community I worked with was founded by members of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Its central aim—to end police brutality—is an issue that disproportionately affects people of color. As a straight, white, able-bodied man taking on a leadership role within this community, it was imperative that I recognize my own privileged positionality. One of the issues I struggled with in writing my final project was the extent to which I should focus on that positionality. The experience of trying to write myself into the community with whom I was working was but another reminder of the difficulty and necessity of critically reflecting on one's own position of power and influence. The disparate power dynamic I experienced in working with Justice Together, a newly-established campus activist group, naturally opened up a host of larger ethical dilemmas: What does it mean to simply *recognize* privilege? What is or should be the role of an ally in social justice work? Who is representing whom? Whose voices are lost or silenced to make space for an ally's? Throughout the semester, these were the kinds of questions we wrestled with in the seminar. In fact, questions of power dynamics and positionality regularly came up in our classroom metadiscourse—from classroom etiquette to trigger topics to conversational ethics. The importance of critically examining the researcher's subjectivity remained central to our collective concerns as student-scholars, in and out the classroom.

Challenging the good intentions we have for our research

Muriel: Throughout my research and particularly in the writing phase, I worried that this work could become another piece romanticizing the agonized efforts of writers of color struggling for visibility, agency, and financial stability. How do I talk about struggle without feeding into the public image of the starving artist? How do I nuance my analysis of the struggles of poets of color in contrast to white artists?

In one of my interviews, a poet talks about their particular struggle to achieve stable, salaried employment in literary organizations while also being gender-nonconforming and non-white. They state that employers view their non-normative gender and racial presentations as unprofessional, despite their extensive literary-organizing experiences and qualifications. It was a necessary story to tell and illustrative of the oppressive tactics that queer poets of color have to contend with to exist as an artist at present. Yet the interviewee was careful to remark that their critique was through their eyes only and could be disputed by others in a number of ways. There was simultaneous critique and care in the way they chose to discuss their circumstances. As a researcher, I wanted to represent this nuance in my writing. I did not want to stop at articulating the idea that oppressive biases exist in literary employment but to show how queer writers of color feel a constant need to verify these moments with others, to second-guess their own interpretations of experiences that *feel* oppressive, and to exercise extreme care when naming violations for fear of losing credibility in the larger literary community.

Conclusion

Challenging English, or, What does it mean for community literacy studies to travel out from Composition and Rhetoric?

Alex: Despite being from different fields, we were all drawn to this seminar on community literacies, which focused on making research not only ethical, but also human. Many times during seminar, I felt grateful to be surrounded by scholars who were willing to step out of their comfort zones and go into the field, meet new people, and then be candid with the group about our projects' challenges. The seminar focused on the processes of our projects, not just the end products, which are what we often obsess about in academia. It also reminded us that research is not just about data and figures. Knowledge stems from experiences, and qualitative researchers have to be careful how we listen to and what we do with people's experiences. In examining other communities, we also *formed* a community whose members can continue to consult with and reach out to one another.

Sarah: Having a seminar focused on community in a large and largely traditional English department meant that many of our discussions centered around making a case for this kind of work, reassuring ourselves that it can be done and is worth doing despite skepticism from colleagues who prefer and privilege more traditional scholarship. It was evident that, as a class, we were all aware of the risks involved in committing to this kind of work. Many of us initially lacked certain vocabulary and knowledge about community literacy work and the various ways it might be executed. There simply aren't many models of or discussions about community literacy or community work in general in a department as traditional as ours. It almost seemed like taking a class outside of the department. The other side of that, though, is that the novelty of a course like this really opened up our creativity, giving

us the freedom and incentive to explore new ideas or old ideas that we've never had the opportunity to pursue. And I speak for myself, but I think others might agree, that the distinct character of this seminar among our more traditional English seminars actually helped me fuse disparate aspects of my scholarly identity within and beyond the department.

Kieran: I agree with Alex's and Sarah's comments. As a student of English literature whose partner is a sociology student, I often find myself questioning the social value of the kind of work that is produced by English departments: politically progressive but not activist; concerned with issues of representation but rarely deigning to represent actual communities; and generally written, if not from an armchair, then from a research library. It would not be fair to expect community literacy scholars to reform the traditional English department, but the existence of such a field or methodology or philosophy presents a challenge to the underlying assumptions of how English should be done. On a personal level, although I probably will not change my overall scholarly focus to community literacies or even rhetoric, I have new questions with which to challenge myself when I otherwise might have barged ahead: Why *not* conduct field research? What about non-written forms of discourse? Who am I to write this, and how do I feel about this experience?

Muriel: As a graduate student pursuing my Masters of Fine Arts in creative writing, taking an English seminar that focuses on community literacies has been extremely influential to my writing practice. Alex mentions the importance of research that is not only "ethical, but also human." It is such an interesting note to make, especially since our respective discipline—literature, writing studies, creative writing—are all concerned with "the human," and yet I think there is a simultaneous tendency in academia to flatten the rich diversity of human experiences. What we learned in our seminar is that this flattening tendency stems, in part, from a long history of practices that sought to contain and assert power over marginalized communities—the notion of "good" work masking oppressive practices. If we are not mindful of this history, we can become complicit in these oppressive practices.

Oftentimes, I am told that literature and creative writing have no stakes, that literary merit is based purely on individual genius. I am happy that this course has given me tools to trouble this notion and to approach my own art production and social and political involvement in literary spaces with the understanding that both my work and these spaces are always ideologically inflected. This includes my own current MFA program and English department, which are spaces that allow me to examine community literacies while also belonging to a long tradition of exclusionary academic practices. I'm wary of the ivory tower and what it does with our research on marginalized communities, particularly if we, the researchers, also identify as members of those marginalized communities. This course has made me think about my relationship to my work within the department, to feel and sometimes fight for a sense of ownership over my work, and to constantly interrogate the ways in which I

can do this work without compromising my connection to the communities of which I am a part.

Sue: This article began by asking what it means for community literacy studies to be taken up as a category of English studies beyond composition and rhetoric. What we find in the reflections from the LSU seminar participants resonates with a central insight from Bowen et al. Even in a writing studies-specific program, they found that "the incentive to recognize rhetoric and literacy as situated, public, social, and political domains of activity is at odds with the persistent belief that academic success requires a focus on activities removed from civic life" (18). If this is true within writing studies, it is much more so in areas of English studies that have rarely centered social engagement: literature, creative writing, and traditional rhetoric. Yet the reflections in the present article strongly suggest that writing studies and related fields are not the only areas of English in which graduate students find value in purposeful, reflective engagement with communities and literacies beyond the academy.

The work we undertook together in the Researching Community Literacies seminar caused participants to challenge ourselves and one another in sometimes profound ways. As Matthew mentioned in the "Challenging the role of researcher" section above, we had moments of joy and moments of tension; I suspect that some of that tension rose to the surface exactly *because* we were talking so directly about ethical human interaction and situated daily experience. It is, or ought to be, impossible to delve into community literacy studies without ending up remembering one's own experiences and motivations and blind spots. That's challenging stuff anywhere, but added to the pressures and anxieties of graduate study in general, and engagement with mostly unfamiliar, non-academic sites of practice in particular, it generates a special intensity.

The student reflections throughout this article tell a story of intelligent, creative scholars challenging ourselves and one another, asking questions we are not used to asking in academic spaces, connecting with unfamiliar—sometimes uncomfortable—spaces and subjects of study, acknowledging difficulties and disappointments, and emphasizing a humane approach to our academic and creative work. That humaneness is an orientation that surely has more than a linguistic root in common with the humanities; I would suggest that it is, in fact, the great value that community literacy studies can contribute to an English department, whatever its disciplinary makeup.

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Author Bios

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Jeremy Cornelius is an English PhD student at Louisiana State University. He currently works in queer theory, visual studies, southern studies, and digital humanities with a focus on comics, zines, and visual poetry. Before enrolling at LSU, he worked as the Program Assistant for the Sexualities Project at Northwestern and handled social media for ArtWell in Philadelphia. He will be researching zines in the residency program at the Queer Zine Archive Project in Milwaukee this summer.

Shannon Kenny is an MFA candidate in creative writing at Louisiana State University. She does performance work at the Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam and Open Mic in downtown Baton Rouge, competing in events such as the Woman's Poetry Slam and Grand Slam Finals. Prior to attending LSU, Shannon was involved in archaeology projects centered around community outreach on the Island of Inishbofin and Dunluce Castle in Northern Ireland. Currently, Shannon writes on disability justice as well as visual/sonic poetics.

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Grace Shuyi Liew's poetry chapbooks *Prop* (Ahsahta Press) and *Book of Interludes* (Anomalous Press) are forthcoming in 2016, and her poetry, essays, and reviews can be found online and in print. Her work intersects with postcolonial feminism, queer theory, transnational migrations, and critical race theories. She is from Malaysia and currently she teaches women and gender studies at LSU, where she is also earning her MFA. Through a residency with the Manship Theatre at the Shaw Center for the Arts, she is also a teaching artist who works in K-12 schools.

Kieran Lyons is a PhD student in English literature at Louisiana State University, where he also teaches writing. He received an M.F.A. in fiction writing from the University of Mississippi and a B.A. in cognitive sciences and studio art from Rice University. He is interested in interdisciplinary approaches to studying animals, food, and global literatures.

Matthew Tougas is a second-year PhD student in English (Writing and Culture) at LSU where, in addition to teaching first- and second-year composition courses, he serves as the director of *Justice Together at LSU* and is a founding member of LSU's *Rhetoric Society of America* chapter. Matthew earned his bachelor's degree at the University of Kansas and his master's at the University of New Mexico, both with concentrations in Rhetoric and Composition. Currently, he is a member of the Writing Program Administrators-Graduate Organization's (WPA-GO) Graduate Committee.

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Sarah L. Webb is a PhD student in the Department of English at Louisiana State University. Her primary research interests include literacy, digital media, and black women's studies. Before enrolling at LSU, she managed websites and social media accounts for local TV stations, taught high school English and college writing courses, and worked as a freelance writer and editor. For many years Sarah has engaged in youth mentoring and community work. She also maintains a blog, ColorismHealing.org, through which she hosts writing contests and other literacy events.

Interview with Steve Parks

Jennifer Hitchcock

Abstract

Jennifer Hitchcock interviews community activist and director of Syracuse University's Composition and Cultural Rhetoric doctoral program, Steve Parks. They discuss Parks's working-class background, career path, influences, and activism. Parks also considers the direction of the field of composition and rhetoric and expresses optimism for the future.

Introduction

Steve Parks is an accomplished composition and rhetoric scholar, teacher, and community activist, and he currently serves as the director of Syracuse University's Composition and Cultural Rhetoric doctoral program. He received his doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh in 1994 with a dissertation focused on the history of the 1974 CCCCs' "Students' Right to Their Own Language" statement, a revised version of which was published in book form as *Class Politics: The Movement for "The Students' Right to Their Own Language"* as part of NCTE's Refiguring English Studies series.

While an assistant professor at Temple University from 1997 to 2004, Parks directed New City Writing: A Research Institute for the Study and Practice of Literature, Literacy, and Culture, and he founded New City Community Press (NCCP) in 1998. NCCP publishes a variety of community literacy collections about urban life, local culture, economic rights, and social justice, giving local communities the opportunity to tell their own stories and have their voices address important national and global issues. Among its other work, NCCP also publishes the peer-reviewed academic journal, *Reflections: A Journal of Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing, and Service Learning*, for which Parks has also served as an editor.

In recent years, much of Parks's scholarship has focused on how writing and the field of composition and rhetoric can promote social change and grassroots activism. Parks and Eli Goldblatt discuss the ways that WAC programs can serve as productive locations for writing programs to connect with local communities in "Writing