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## **“And What Should We Do About It?”: Community Engagement, the Flint Water Crisis, and Teaching as Salvage in the Michigan English Classroom**

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# “And What Should We Do About It?”: Community Engagement, the Flint Water Crisis, and Teaching as Salvage in the Michigan English Classroom

by Madeline Langell and Scott Jarvie

**A man saw a bird and wanted to paint it. The problem, if there was one, was simply a problem with the question. Why do anything at all?... Why bother, what does it solve?...What is alive and what isn't and what should we do about it?**  
—Richard Siken



Siken (2014) poses these questions in his poem “The Language of the Birds,” prefaced by a description of the feelings of a man who, in many odd and conflicting ways, “felt like a bird.” In exploring philosophical, existential, and personal issues in the context of a piece about art and representation, Siken’s questions take on an urgency beyond the content of the poem itself—this isn’t just about painting a bird. Posed differently, we might ask questions about why we should even care about such trivial concerns: What gives this (or any) thing value? And, the poet urges, “What should we do about it?”

As English teachers in Michigan today, these questions, with their insistence on how and what we value, and what that moves us to do, feel especially urgent. On December 14, 2015, the city of Flint, Michigan declared a state of emergency in response to growing



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concerns of lead poisoning in the city’s water supply (“State of Emergency,” 2015). Citizens of Flint reported concern for children exposed to lead, which can cause significant developmental issues and learning disabilities, as well as birth defects and miscarriages (Goodnough, 2016). A variety of responses from state and federal governments followed, but the safety of the city’s water supply remains in dispute to this day (Baptiste, 2018), and the damage extends beyond the physical harm done to countless citizens, families, and children to a tarnishing of the identity of the community itself. As one resident noted, “This will be Flint’s reality for a long time. People will not trust the water” (May, 2018).

Others connected the crisis in Flint to the failures of the U.S. government's response to catastrophic flooding along the Gulf Coast in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina: "Just like Katrina, they failed us here in Flint" (May, 2018). Importantly, as with Katrina and the majority Black city of New Orleans, critics and commentators linked the crisis in Flint and the damage it wreaked on the city's Black population to racist policies. To that end, a report submitted by a government-appointed civil rights commission found that in Flint, "historical, structural, and systemic racism combined with implicit bias" (Almasy & Ly, 2017) played a significant role in exacerbating the crisis. One way we might think about Siken's questions with respect to the crisis in Flint is to ask why these citizens are not valued, and what, as teachers and students and citizens of Michigan, can we do about it? What *should* we do about it?

Asked differently, how can teachers and students help *salvage* this situation? In using the term 'salvage,' we align our work with that of fiction author Bonnie Jo Campbell, whose story collection *American Salvage* (2009) takes the term as a central metaphor for the ways we might come to (re)value the lives of Michiganders on the margins. As White teachers and researchers, we use it carefully, though, wary (given its etymological roots) of how it might feed too easily into problematic savior mindsets. Our work here, then, involves actively pushing against those mindsets while nevertheless engaging questions of value in Michigan English classrooms. That is, we understand 'salvage' to mean an approach which attempts to assert the value in the un- and under-valued, an issue of pressing importance for those in Michigan, such as the residents of Flint, whose lives are clearly not valued by civic and government policies. In what follows, we present plans for a proposed unit, which uses Campbell's collection as the primary text, to consider how salvage might be useful for teaching civic engagement in responses to crises like that in Flint.

## **Literacy Education In & Out of the English Classroom**

In asking these questions of the youth we teach,

we build on a burgeoning body of literacy scholarship which positions students and youth as civic agents in their communities (Fisher, 2005; Knight & Watson, 2014; Mirra & Garcia, 2017; Watson, 2016; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). This work answers the Common Core State Standards' call to "prepare students for life outside the classroom" (Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association [CCSSO & NGA], 2010) by foregrounding and building upon the varied multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996)—the increasingly diverse, contemporary, linguistic, and multimodal literacy practices—young people bring with them into schools. The goal of such work is to consider life outside the classroom as constituting an active engagement with civic institutions and community life, developing students as agents of positive change in their communities.

The authors of our English Language Arts standards clearly understand this preparation as occurring by the time students graduate high school (CCSSO & NGA, 2010), and in that sense they are oriented towards the future capabilities of students as citizens, college-goers and professionals, rather than what youth are capable of here and now. While the promise of a more-just future undoubtedly depends on the eventual capacities of current high-school students in Michigan, we're not sure the citizens of Flint can afford to wait—not when, in the words of one resident: "They are killing us...they killed us. We are an invisible people...and we don't matter" (Taylor, 2018). We seek, then, to teach English students in ways that prepare them for the future while also equipping them for the urgent challenges of the present, like that of the Flint crisis.

Fortunately, scholars of youths' literacy practices have shown us the considerable abilities young people already possess. Kirkland (2013), for example, details the complex and abundant literacy lives of Black youth outside of schools, demonstrating how literacy practices operate as powerful expressions of youths' active roles in communities. His study finds that youths' literacy lives are:

fashioned through interaction between mind and

society, across space and time, in such a way that culture, gender, social class, and social struggle interact only to resolve in meaningful content and lucid clarity, demarcating very subtle distinctions between identities, languages, cultures and communities. (p. 10)

More recently, Kinloch, Burkhard, and Penn (2017) contributed to this body of work by focusing on two Black male youth in an after-school program who took up literacies in order to interrogate racialized narratives surrounding their communities. That study found that youth were able to generate counternarratives revealing their “agency in negotiating structural inequalities endemic to US society” (p. 34). Elsewhere, Cremin, Mottram, Collins, Powell, and Drury (2012) examined, in a year-long inquiry of 18 teachers and their students, how learners’ “literacy lives had consequences with regard to the curriculum and/or home–school relations” (p. 104). Their inquiry, however, left questions as to how teachers could usefully engage those lives in the classroom. Collectively, this work shows ways youth can and do contribute to the growth of their communities through their already-present abilities with respect to literacy.

Yet much of this scholarship foregrounds the talents of youth *beyond* schools rather than *within* them. The challenge for educators today becomes building upon these practices while also meeting the calls of the official curriculum. How can we teach students “skills and understandings...[that] have wide applicability outside the classroom or workplace” that might be taken up in service of community betterment, while also asking them to attend to the more traditional work of English teaching, for example to “undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature?” (CCSSO & NGA, 2010, p. 3). As Whitney (2011) reminds:

it can feel invasive, even violating, to bring into the classroom the literacies that students practice in the world outside of school—representing oneself on Facebook, or staying up all night devouring the new Harry Potter, or journaling about one's private

life—to the classroom, even when we have good reasons to do so. (p. 55)

The incorporation of youths’ out-of-school literacy practices into the English classroom is clearly a difficult challenge. It is fraught with the complications of doing so in ways that are respectful, helpful, and filled with the promise of more meaningful and just pedagogy for youth and their communities.

This is also critical work. In considering teaching youth civic engagement as a response to social inequity and injustice, we join with Garcia, Mirra, Morrell, Martinez, and Scorza (2015), among others, who understand this as the work of critical literacy. A critical literacy approach aims to develop students’ abilities to interrogate “ideologies, cultures, economies, institutions and political systems” (Luke, 2012, p. 5), including those which dominate civic life. In the critical English classroom, this means engaging and interrogating the literacy practices of the civic communities in which students live and learn, with the eventual goal of social transformation towards justice (Morrell, 2005, p. 313). Rooted in theorizing on critical literacy and Freireian (1970/2000) critical pedagogy, this approach to English teaching orients students towards texts critically, asking them to attend to the ways in which texts reproduce systemic injustice. In doing so, students are asked to imagine the transformations necessary for more equitable social and civic life. We understand our work here as sharing in this critical tradition by framing the need for youth civic engagement against a broader context of systemic oppression and social injustice.

One way teachers and researchers have effectively approached social and civic problems in classrooms is through project-based learning (PBL) (Condliffe et al., 2017). While the unit we’ve constructed does not follow any strict PBL framework, it does share much in common with this body of research. Central to our work, for example, are questions which drive and motivate student learning, a foundational principle of PBL approaches (Condliffe et al., 2017; Krajcik & Shin, 2014; Larmer & Mergendoller, 2015). Similarly, our work began with and came to be driven forward

by lingering questions: How can we teach students to locate the development of their literacy lives, both in and out of English classrooms, as intersecting with the lives of those in need in their communities? And how can we equip them with literacy skills that can help foster change for justice both now and in the future?

## Unit-Planning Salvage

With these in mind, I (Madeline) set out to design a unit which responds to these questions, envisioning how I could engage them thoughtfully with high school English students in ways that might help them come to value the overlooked and undervalued in their communities. The overlooked can take shape on both community-wide and personal levels. For example, we can see the city of Flint as a governmentally-undervalued community; we can do this alongside individual cases of abandon, like an overgrown park or a particular moment in a citizen's life. This approach is born out of my commitment to teach students to critically examine the "word and the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987), and then to use those critiques to engage in transformative social action (Janks, 2010, p. 153) of the kind that may be needed in communities like Flint, careful, though, to avoid assuming a deficit perspective that positions us as community saviors. In gathering resources for the unit, I came across Michigan author Bonnie Jo Campbell's powerful story collection *American Salvage* (2009), which fictionalizes life on the margins in rural Michigan. Like the dire accounts of survivors in Flint, Campbell's characters struggle through lives squeezed by contemporary political and economic forces which do not seem to value them, those who are left, as the book's jacket memorably describes, to "live off what is left behind."

I was particularly taken by the notion of *salvage*. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines salvage as "to rescue or save, especially from wreckage or ruin." But to me, and I'd argue Campbell as well, salvage does not necessarily entail rescue. In the story "King Cole's American Salvage," Campbell describes a "pile of catalytic converters... rusted from the slush and mud and road salt... each of their bodies contain[ing] a core of platinum" (p. 130). "Bodies" is not used incidentally here; for

Campbell, salvage acts as metaphor for the social lives of her characters. In her understanding, to salvage is to recognize and act upon the already existing beauty within a thing (or a person), despite the ordinary or even dismal conditions of existence—or as the novelist Dave Eggers (2001) puts it: "we see the beauty within and cannot say no" (p. 6). This recognition of value is prominently displayed in Campbell's collection through a variety of characters by turns redeemed and irredeemable, living in grisly environments and negotiating precarious situations. In reading, we encounter William Slocum, Jr., the "wretched" meth addict who, while standing trial for attempted murder, moans "something like regret" (p. 127), as well as a nameless young girl, struggling with meth addiction and no place to stay, who takes refuge with strangers only to be later violated by them. Campbell's stories, without romanticization, observe the grim brutality of Michiganders' lives, though importantly not without instances of beauty. One poignant example of this comes in "The Burn," in which we glimpse a change of heart as the misogynistic protagonist Jim accepts the aid of a neighboring lesbian couple, or the light-hearted tale "The Yard Man," wherein a man and a woman project their marital problems onto the yard's wildlife: bees, ermines, and a mysterious orange snake. Such artful presentations contrast blurred meanings with concretely real situations; in this way, Campbell comes to understand salvage as defined by both humanity and complexity.

Moved by her portrayal of these intricate characters and the ways in which she explores value in Michigan specifically, I hope to share this inquiry into personhood and worth in the English classroom. Through Campbell's varying settings and perspectives, the questions the novel raises about life in this state have the potential to resonate with students. And with this resonance comes knowledge and pathways for students to take up their ideas, using both creative and critical lenses, in service of bettering the communities in which they live. Thus *American Salvage* serves as a literary text around which I could effectively build a unit about the experiences of people living in Michigan, particularly those on the margins, allowing for an inquiry into their identities, lives, and communities.



**Goals and questions.** I envision salvage as a classroom topic that could work to achieve my goals for the unit: to (1) teach students to unpack problematic savior mindsets as well as (2) spur reconsideration and recognition of notions of value in the persons they encounter. In unpacking savior mindsets, the unit allows students opportunities to discuss their relationship to social and political inequalities, the essential question being: What do you think constitutes value? Or, we might unpack this further with a series of sub-questions: How can we know when something, some place, or someone, is valuable? How does value come into being? Who or what gives value? And, whose understandings of value get valued more? Less? Engaging in these questions, the classroom becomes a space in which students' roles as citizens are attended to, where they not only accumulate new knowledge, but also bring in their own forms of knowledge, and thus understand knowledge as a mode of empowerment. Further, the unit aims to spur reconsideration and recognition of value in students, asking, "How do *you* define value?" and, "Where does it come from?"

As an English teacher, I understand language and literacy as an art form (hence, "Language Arts"). I seek to position my students, then, as creative forces for change as they engage with and respond to these essential questions. While more traditional English concerns like grammar or the study of classic texts have a place in my classroom, I hope to cultivate a space where students are free to grow as producers and interpreters of texts. Drawing on Campbell's text as inspiration, I understand the notion of working with salvage as perceiving the outside world and then interpreting what you see, using what you find in combination with what you bring to it, thus making the classroom a creative and artistic space, oriented outwards towards communities. The unit asks students to creatively engage with the essential questions in ways that position them as agents of positive future change.

In creating the unit, I built around these essential questions while seeking to foster an artistic environment that supports students as creative forces of activism in their communities. The unit asks students to rummage

within the texts, their communities, and their own lives—wherever they find inspiration—and to notice things that are broken or ordinary, fragments they can transform into something meaningful. Students can decide what they deem valuable and are able to lend something of themselves to in this salvaging process—perhaps emotions, insights, or hopes. In doing this, the unit also focuses on empathy and perspective. In order to recognize value in others, whether the complex characters of *American Salvage* or the people of devalued communities like Flint, students must be able to understand others' storied worlds (Alsup, 2013). From there, students can understand salvage socially as a metaphor for the ways they can restore value in communities hurting due to hardship or neglect.

**Lesson plans.** To accomplish all of this within the unit, I created a diverse set of lessons. As the unit is based around empowering students to use creativity and become producers of their own, I chose to focus heavily on projects—papers, stories, and photography, among other things—to add to a portfolio. I view these activities as not just connected to material studied in the classroom but also as something to be worked on within the classroom. As our content showcases communities such as Flint and rural Michigan, students' work engages them as active producers so they can begin to see themselves as involved citizens in their own communities.

Students will begin the unit by reading *American Salvage* as the foundational text, and along the way, utilize discussion-based class work, thinking about questions like, "Against all odds, salvation counterbalances loss and despair in unexpected ways. Where do you find the most important or powerful instances of salvation in the collection?" (Campbell, 2018). Practice with pair-shares and other forms of discussion leads up to a Socratic seminar on the titular story, "King Cole's American Salvage." Student-centered methods such as Socratic seminar allow students to not only better understand the material, but also to more fully develop their skills in advocating for themselves and what they believe in. As a way to further discussion of value, students will finish reading the collection and

then start a personal argumentative writing piece. This assignment allows them to relate to a character in the text using evidence from their own lives, thus building on ideas of value and empathy as well as centering how students identify aspects of themselves. Following the wrap-up of *American Salvage* and their argumentative piece, documentaries can be incorporated to bolster the unit (time permitting), such as Michael Moore's (1989) portrayal of Flint amid the decline of the auto industry, *Roger & Me*. The point, in assembling such a variety of texts which engage notions of value within communities, is to broaden students' imagination: to get them to open up their sense of what is possible to think—and eventually, do—in responding to these issues, as civic agents capable in their own right.

To begin the second section of the unit, which looks at salvage through a civic lens, students will continue learning about Flint and its water crisis through different media. The event is first engaged with online articles about the water crisis and written accounts of those affected by the disaster. Then, to delve into a consideration of various media's effects on message delivery, we read a poem dedicated to Flint: "I Told the Water," by Michigan native Tarfia Faizullah (2018). Her text reflects on the crisis four years later, merging feelings towards the Flint disaster with those of others worlds apart, as a second generation Bangladeshi who knows well the devastation flooding wreaked on her family's community abroad. Yet Faizullah salvages these catastrophes into something poetic, and her poem provides for a new, international perspective that invites students to consider these questions on a global scale. Finally, in response to a poignant question I received from a colleague when building this unit—"Will students be salvaging anything themselves?"—I choose to center the culminating assessment project around student creation from a variety of unexpected items; thus students will have the chance to actually engage in salvage themselves.

In order to illustrate aspects of this unit in greater detail, here I will more closely examine one lesson which uses multiple texts as ways of knowing one perspective through the lens of another. As there are

many texts in this unit, using one perspective as a lens for another permits more extensive subject coverage and also models salvage, repurposing a text as valuable in another context. The lesson, titled "Flint, Michigan: Using Non-Fictional Pieces Alongside Poetry," takes students' prior knowledge of poetry and pairs it with study of a journal article. Students will begin reviewing the Faizullah (2018) poem, using their notes and full-class talk to focus on how it speaks to the water crisis, looking at lines they find impactful, such as "I told the water / you're right." They then read the article, "Flint Crisis, Four Years On" (Glenza, 2018), and individually respond to questions regarding strategies, tone, and purpose of the poem and article. Further they compare and contrast the advantages and disadvantages of each type of text. To bring forth dialogue about their thinking, I will give students time to prepare their opinions with a pair share, responding to the question, "Which piece do you find best communicates its message about Flint?" The goal is to consider medium and effectiveness of message for these Flint-based pieces. The focus on Flint "four years later" is intentional: What (and who) is left behind? What can (or should) we salvage?

**Assessment.** Moving further forward, the last cumulative assessment will be a student-imagined salvage project, consisting of a short story and a set of photographs. Too often, assessment is the be-all, end-all of a unit, but I wanted to designate time for students to be able to salvage something themselves. While frequently in the unit, salvage and value are related to people and places and not objects, for this activity, I hoped for students to find an object as a focus. At this point I will take time in the unit to point out to students that the comparison of the value of people to the value of objects is something potentially problematic, asking, "How might dangerous savior mindsets or dehumanization contaminate our thinking here, if we're not thoughtful?" Students will then be instructed to find an object currently not being valued. This could mean an ink pen in the back of the family junk drawer or a cracked photo frame at a resale shop—anything that strikes them as un(der)valued. To renew the item with its lost or overlooked value, students will "salvage" the item of their choice through centering it in a short



story. My example for students focuses on a ring that my sister bought out of a quarter machine on a whim, which sat purposelessly on my desk for a year. Students should feature this artifact in a creative story in which its value is integral to the plot. This story could be realistic—two sisters bond over the course of a difficult week—or fantastical—a ring leading you on a journey to a new realm.

Following this beginning part of the project, the second piece will allow students to “salvage” their item in reality as well as text. Students will be asked to find a purpose for their item in their own life. Objects can function as an accessory, a gift, an art piece... any kind of renewed or transformed use that, in their eyes, illustrates the object’s value. They must then photograph the object in its new role, and with two or three pictures, demonstrate artistically how this new value is brought forth, for example by considering elements of a photograph. That discussion might lend itself to a consideration of photographs as texts and their features as analogous to literary devices—providing a through-line back to the Common Core State Standards, if you like. In this way, while grading is up to each individual educator, one possible assessment for these projects could provide students with target literary devices to be implemented throughout both pieces of the assignment. Students would be assessed on their accuracy in response to the prompt, the appropriate use of their literary (and photographic) strategies, and their creative efforts. The larger point, however, is that salvage in this way is brought from imagination to reality—a small but meaningful transformation made by and for students and their communities.

### So What? Why Bother?

To return to the beginning, Siken (2014) posed the question, “Why bother, what does it solve?” in reference to art. In other words, why is creativity valuable? This essay presented ideas for a unit which similarly wondered: What is value? How does our definition of value come to shape communities and the lives of those living in them? Like Siken, we do find creativity to be valuable. We are writers, teachers, and readers, after all. Following Siken and Campbell (2009), we think that,

perhaps, to take the physical (birds, auto parts, forgotten places) alongside the abstract (emotions, ideas, memories, dreams) in order to see something in a new light, is a way to search for value. Which is all to say that we understand creativity as an act of salvage. Creative salvage is valuable in that it is a way to empower oneself as an agent of change in one’s community, be it in Michigan or elsewhere. It is our hope that this work can help teachers imagine how to effect positive change in communities like Flint with their English students. In English classrooms, we can learn to understand the storied worlds around us, and also to write stories ourselves, taking up bits of the world and of the lives of others and piecing them together in new ways, finding value.

As for Siken’s question, “What should we do about it?”, this planned unit demonstrates how we can use salvage creatively in the classroom, helping students grow as readers, writers, citizens, and activists. In this article, we have shared ideas for what a unit that teaches civic engagement rooted in an imaginative literary text (Campbell’s story collection) and a real-world contemporary crisis for students in (Flint) Michigan, can look like. In doing so, we imagine how we might cultivate in students the creative and critical dispositions necessary for envisioning better futures for all. *What should we do about it?* As teachers we know that we can’t just give meaning to students, nor should we. What we *should* do about it is encourage students to question, create, salvage, and go off in search of value themselves, that they might make lives—neighbors’, peers’, community members’, and their own—more livable. To that end, this experience considering salvage in the classroom points to a number of suggestions for teachers looking to implement these ideas in their own work:

1. Build upon what students bring with them into the classroom: their prior knowledge, beliefs, emotions and values, certainly, but also dearly-held texts (Whitney, 2011), objects, community affiliations and out-of-school experiences (Kirkland, 2013)—all of which come to matter in how they make sense of the world and choose to live in it.
2. Bring vibrant literary texts, such as Campbell’s

(2009) *American Salvage*, which narrativize and animate the diversity of persons' lives, into conversation with current events like the Flint Crisis and other issues of need in our communities.

3. Design units around questions, engaging ethical issues of urgency that students might act upon to create positive change in their communities (Watson, 2016).
4. Integrate traditional concerns of English classrooms, like grammar and argumentative analysis, with creative, artistic, and personal expressions that enrich possibilities for imagining more just futures (Greene, Burke, & McKenna, 2016).
5. Provide narratives of empowerment that position students as agents of change in their own lives and the lives of those in need in their communities.

In taking up these suggestions, we believe Michigan educators can teach students to take creative action, building on texts and the notion of salvage in response to community needs. We hope teachers will find imaginative ways to do this work in the places they live, through the texts they teach, and with the students whose voices matter in working towards a better future.

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# Kaleidoscope

Publishing Michigan Student Authors



The Michigan Reading Association invites a deserving student from YOUR school to become a published author!

Select ONE piece of writing from your building. Proofread and edit selection with student author. Submit the Student Information Sheet and entry by 12/20/19.



## Guidelines:

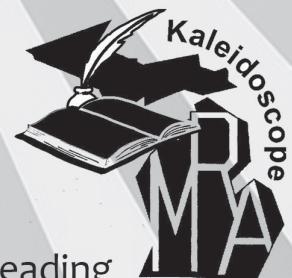
- K-12 schools are invited to participate
  - One entry per school building
  - The manuscript may be prose or poetry.
- Students may submit a black line drawing as a scanned photo (.jpeg file) with their written piece
- The Kaleidoscope publication is geared toward a K - 12 audience. Work with themes or language deemed inappropriate for all ages will not be published.
  - The entry must be in polished form.
- Manuscript must be submitted online via the link found at [michiganreading.org](http://michiganreading.org) under Student Involvement.

## Word Limit

K-6th Grade - 250 word limit

7th - 12th Grade - 500 word limit

Note: Written pieces must be within the stated word limit in order to be published.



For more information contact the Michigan Reading Association office at [celmer@michiganreading.org](mailto:celmer@michiganreading.org) or 616-647-9310.