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Payment in the Polity: Funded Community Writing Projects

Audrey Simango, Matthew Stadler, and Alison Turner

Abstract

In this collaborative essay Audrey Simango, Matthew Stadler, and Alison Turner—Reader/Advisor/Editors (RAEs) at The GOAT PoL—explore the subject of money. Most discussions about money have focused on “debates over compensation” of research subjects (Snow et al. 54), or connections between community writing and well-funded projects, such as the Federal Writers Project of the 1930s (Mutnick). After providing context for The GOAT PoL, we reflect on the way our small payments to participants shift our relationships. We ask: 1) How does the exchange of money on The GOAT PoL affect the RAE’s experience of reading, editing, and advising authors? 2) How do the challenges we encounter by paying authors make visible what we thought we knew about power and privilege across international writing projects?; and 3) Is it possible for the exchange of money—with its unpredictable impacts—to expand and deepen, rather than shrink and diminish, the polity of literature?

Keywords: community writing, funding, international community writing, polity of literature

In most community writing projects participants are not paid for their writing. The facilitator, workshop leader, or writing consultant might be offered a stipend—or a line on their CV, if they are in academia; but the people who show up to write or submit usually participate voluntarily, to get the experience or further opportunities. On the other hand, in most commercial publishing platforms based on submissions, the publisher selects a few pieces while rejecting scores more, and then makes money by selling the work in the market, sharing some of the profit—when there is profit—with the writer. Often publishers will charge all of the writers who apply to be published ten or twenty dollars for the privilege of applying. Our community writing project takes the relationship between author and publisher and flips it upside-down. At The GOAT PoL (The Geopolitical Open Atlas of The Polity of Literature), we publish every writer who asks, and we pay every writer who chooses to work with us 60 euros. Funded by a Canadian arts foundation, the Musagetes Foundation, with payments originating in Guelph, Ontario, Canada, The GOAT PoL also supports a team of six Reader/Advisor/Editors (RAEs, pronounced “ray”), located in Zimbabwe, Spain, Germany, the United States, and the Netherlands. RAEs are paid a monthly stipend of 400 euros to read, advise, and edit the work of any writer who

submits to The GOAT PoL. Our goal is to help authors complete their work and publish it on our site.¹ Publishing on our site is non-exclusive, meaning writers can publish the same piece elsewhere, if they wish. There is no limit on the number of times a writer can submit and publish on The GOAT PoL.

In this collaborative essay three RAEs from The GOAT PoL—Audrey Simango, Matthew Stadler, and Alison Turner—explore a topic that we can't seem to simplify: money. We attempt to loosen the knot that complicates our work as RAEs in this project, and, we presume, the work that takes place in other funded community-writing projects. We hope that this essay brings attention to the relatively quiet published dialog around money and community writing, most of which focuses on the “debates over compensation” of research subjects in settings of complex power dynamics (Snow et al. 54), or connections between community writing and large-scale funded projects, such as the Federal Writers Project of the 1930s (Mutnick). Here, after providing a brief context for The GOAT PoL, we reflect on how small payments to individual participants affects the work of community writing. We group our guiding questions into three categories: 1) How does the exchange of money on The GOAT PoL affect a RAE's experience of reading, editing, and advising authors?; 2) How do the challenges that we encounter when trying to pay authors on The GOAT PoL make visible or nuance what we thought we knew about power and privilege across international community writing projects?; and 3) Is it possible that the exchange of money—with its inevitable though mostly undesired impact on our work with writers—can expand and deepen, rather than shrink and diminish, the polity of literature?

What is a polity of literature?

The GOAT PoL aims to create a living polity of literature in which we write, read, and work together. In this project, a polity is the collective “space of appearance” that Hannah Arendt refers to in her analysis of Aristotle's *On Politics*. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt writes, “The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be...It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me” (198-9). Following Aristotle, Arendt understood “politics” as the human capacity for action and expression that arises in each of us whenever we gather as equals in a “space of appearance.” Our agency, belonging, and collective potential is catalyzed by this uniquely human arrangement.

A polity of literature happens when such a space manifests as writing-and-reading together—that is, in the shared space of texts that we write or read, wherein we can encounter and witness one another as equals. We choose the term “literature” to describe this uniquely potent space of writing-and-reading together because we understand literature to be essentially different from other sorts of writing-and-reading. In The GOAT PoL's founding essay, “Potatoes or Rice?,” an anonymous author explains:

By ‘literature’ [we] mean that writing for which every reader has equal authority to make its meanings . . . Literature proves nothing. It asks us to judge for ourselves . . . Literature opens a space of appearance in which we become equals, needing no defense. This contentious plurality, the vivid cacophony of contradictory readings in a polity of literature, is where [we] find [our] agency and belonging.

Normally, writers find their readers in the marketplace by selling what they make to a buyer, an intermediary called “the publisher”. Not so here: The GOAT PoL is a polity and not a marketplace.

In The GOAT PoL, we accept and work on any writing that isn’t generated by an AI chat-bot that’s sent to us by any writer who isn’t plagiarizing. Those who submit writing might want to work on three sentences or ten pages; they might have never shown their work to anyone, or they might be widely published; they might not call themselves “writers” at all; they might submit one thing and never return, or always have something “churning in the PoL”; they might be stateless with no legal ID, or imprisoned, or living in a refugee camp; they might be displaced, unhoused, or they might have comfortable homes and well-paying professional careers. We can never predict who we’ll be working with next when we “claim” new stories from the daily email that shows us new submissions. A writer works with a RAE until both author and RAE believe the story is “ready to publish”; when we publish the story the writer receives sixty euros. Audrey, who is a professional journalist in Zimbabwe, points out that sixty euros isn’t enough payment for most of the professional writers she knows. It’s a low wage. (RAEs are also paid at a less-than full-time wage.) Across the board, The GOAT PoL offers money to everyone who works, but it cannot offer *equitable* payment. This same sixty euros carries a range of economic impacts, depending on each author’s circumstances. Some GOAT PoL authors already enjoy economic stability. Two recently sent us stories about using their own economic stability to support other people in their community. Kimberly Mutandiro’s “The Difficulties of Homelessness in Johannesburg” and Carmen Fong’s “Free99Fridge” both explore how the author responds to her own privileges and comforts when confronted with the hardships around her: urban homelessness in Johannesburg and food insecurity in Atlanta, respectively.

For some of our writers, sixty euros can solve more acute and urgent needs. Many of them live in refugee camps, where the options for employment or financial security are limited, if they exist at all. See, for example, a post by the writer who goes by Emmanuel, “Facing Today, Looking Forward to Tomorrow,” in which he describes where he lives:

Dzaleka refugee camp is very small, congested and surrounded by local villages. This means that refugees lack access to agricultural land as well as the urban economy. As a result most refugees rely entirely on food aid and other external assistance. In the camp, there are individuals who were qualified doctors, engineers, and architects in their home countries. Here, they are forced to depend on others.

For people who are bureaucratically or physically prevented from earning a wage, The GOAT PoL might provide one of their only opportunities to be compensated for their independent labor and ideas. Money is thus a component of The GOAT PoL but not a criterion for working with us. We pay everyone in order to assert the equality of everyone who works, not to redress the injustices of the global economy.

There's no math for calculating the value of what is exchanged when writers share their work with readers. This is especially true in that strange, vulnerable stage when the reader acts as an advisor or editor. When a writer has germinated a new text, the necessary next step is to enlist a trusted reader to read it and start a conversation about the writing. This collective space of writing and reading is precisely what The GOAT PoL addresses. We bring thoughtful and experienced attention to the writer's work at a vulnerable juncture, when the writer knows *that* they have written, but does not yet know *what* they have written.

Most of the time, this process is delightful. As RAEs, all of us have encountered serious writers, who push us as editors to the edge. These are the writers who make follow-ups on their edits, the writers who want to know what can be done to make their work more ambitious, more developed and evolving, like fine wine. These writers come to The GOAT PoL with energy. One example is Nolleen Mhonda, author of "I can't drive to America, but hell, I'll write of it," who wanted his RAE, Audrey, to know the reasons behind every edit and punctuation that he proposed. Such writers are a daily reminder that writers and editors can establish engaged and thorough-going interactions that can continue. If properly fueled, passion for writing can act as a driving force between the writer and editor during the process of working together and toward the product that others can read afterward.

The process of reading, advising, and editing is not transactional. And yet we simultaneously insist on paying authors for this meaningful exchange. The exchange we initiate by soliciting the work of writers—and promising to honor it with both readerly/advisory/editorial attention *and* a paycheck—creates a double-bind. The exchanges are unlike. On the one hand we promise to show up as RAEs. And on the other, we promise to pay the writer. The two promises are so dissimilar that we have tried in many ways to separate them—tried, and, ultimately, failed.

1. Payment Tainting the Polity?

By choosing to pay all of our writers, The GOAT PoL puts the troublesome process of payment right in the middle of the already delicate process of reading and editing. Matthew, who conceived of and planned this project, prefers to separate the work of Reading/Advising/Editing from the process of paying the writers. He asked the foundation's accountant to deal with all payments, so that RAEs could say to writers, "as RAE and writer, our relationship is only about writing, not money; if there's a problem with money, please speak to the accountant." But some writers make it clear that if we work with them on their writing we are expected to help solve the problems of payment that follow. This begins when questions like "When should I expect my first

payment?” start to displace our energetic dialogues about punctuation, metaphors, and audience.

For Audrey, when an interaction between RAE/writer becomes money-focused, it begins to feel like her other work as a professional journalist. As an editor and a RAE, Audrey hopes that the days between claiming a new piece to work on and publishing it will be more of a journey than a process. But when there's money in sight, most writers do not have this view. At times, writers can be so money-oriented that when receiving final edits for an article, they can blatantly tell you to go ahead with all edits and notify them when the payment goes through. What could have been a beautiful journey full of reflection and conversations about literature is turned into a rushed process for payment. This is what can happen when a writer submitting to The GOAT PoL thinks “I need quick cash and I need it fast” rather than “I want to expand my literary horizons. I want to live and breathe writing.”

Knowing that an author is edgy for payment can change how we read, advise, and edit. It becomes difficult for the RAE to do their work thoroughly if the writer is in a hurry to get paid. If we don't respond immediately—or quickly enough for them—these writers might get agitated, pressuring us to sacrifice quality for speed. If we are passionate about what we do, this can have a toll that is emotional as well as physical. When pressured to skip over *all that RAE-writer relationship babble* and hit “publish,” we might feel a bit scammed: is this writer in it only for the money? But a writer scamming The GOAT PoL is dubious. It's too poor of a payoff. And even if they mean to scam us, can't we insist on writing and revision and all the work that goes with it, before agreeing to publish? And if we do that—if the RAE insists on more work before publishing—is it possible that the writer might feel that *we* are trying to scam *them*?

We might ask ourselves as RAEs what we do when payment for work we have done is delayed. Imagine spending time on a story with a RAE, having accepted the deal of entering the polity—a deal that also promises sixty euros—and then not receiving payment soon after finishing your story. Imagine your RAE doesn't respond for three days after you have worked hard on revisions. Would you perhaps think that this whole thing was a joke? That this magical website that pays you for writing was just...a scam?

II. Power and Privilege in the Polity

Many authors reach out to RAEs about payment because sometimes payments *are* delayed, caught up in the virtual, international knot of wire transfers and online payments. Further, there is no one else to whom they can reach out. If The GOAT PoL payment is going to take a writer through the next day or week, don't they have every right to insist on a timely payment? Can we really blame these writers for asking about their payments? It is work, right? Isn't that what we told them when we promised we'd pay them?

But we didn't think we were paying them in a per-story exchange; we thought we were paying authors to engage in the polity of literature. Perhaps we have rosy-col-

ored classes as RAEs who are compensated on a monthly stipend, rather than a per-story basis. As RAEs, we have the privilege to engage the polity with slowness. If we look at this cynically, it actually behooves us to take as long as we can with each author, since no matter how many authors we work with each month, we receive the same stipend. Should we perhaps ask ourselves: would we behave differently as RAEs if we were paid by each story published, rather than through one payment at the end of each month? While RAEs have the power to publish an author's story, we also have the privilege of imposing slowness when we wish to.

While we knew when the project began that payment would not be a smooth process for every author on The GOAT PoL, we did not anticipate the degree to which we now work with authors on a nuanced and individual basis to ensure that they receive their payment. Initially, we offered authors three payment options: a bank wire transfer, PayPal, or Western Union. An author would work with a RAE, the RAE would hit *publish*, and then the accountant at Musagetes would send the author sixty euros. However, we found that most of our writers don't have bank accounts, and thus don't have PayPal either. And many cannot use Western Union for various reasons. So, working with the accountant at Musagetes, Diana Hillier, we added options for MoneyGram and World Remit, two platforms designed for the international movement of small amounts of money. All of these platforms come with their own set of frustrations, fees, and quirks—the accountant has several times needed to call Western Union for an *interview* in which she explains that this is not—and here's that word again—"a scam."

In addition to all the complications discussed above, there are also unpredictable, inconsistent, and substantial transfer fees. The fees are often subtracted from what the author receives when trying to collect their sixty euros. That is, if the writer can fetch the fee on her own. One author told us she had to hire a "businessman" to collect the money for her. She wrote, "The businessman charged \$10 per \$100 to \$500. This is the same as paying for transport when you withdraw money from a nearby town." How far do we take our promise to work with authors and pay them sixty euros? Is part of our promise that authors receive the full sixty-euro payment, regardless of the layers of fees and disadvantages that might intervene? Does our promise mean we should do the extra work to make sure that the fee for every form of "businessman" (whether it is a virtual transfer fee or a person who takes a bus into town) is also compensated? Is it our job to make sure authors get their equal payment, regardless of the circumstances in which they live, which may or may not determine how they can access funds?

And what does any of this have to do with a polity of literature?

III. Payments as Part of the Polity?

Our writers use a great range of different technologies to write and send us their writing. Some writers have personal laptops and are savvy with spellcheck technology; others do their writing on smartphones or iPads, or at community Internet centers. Some writers need to wait hours or days to find a wifi signal needed for accessing

our site and email. There's a similarly wide range of differences in the experiences our writers have when trying to collect their payments.

It is the writers, as much as the RAEs, who are innovating responses to these differences. Sometimes our writers voluntarily collect payment on the behalf of others, as a way to help out without needing "businessmen." And there are many other ways that authors are responding, making new relationships and processes that expand the range and "substance" of our polity. Although it arises from the unintended hardships of receiving payment, there is something lovely about the polity extending itself this way beyond the story posted on the site.

For example, Stephen Pech Gai, a writer from South Sudan who lives in Zimbabwe, has no bank account. He can't use a bank transfer or PayPal. In the decade that he's been fleeing from sectarian violence in his home country, he lived for five years in Kenya, where he was granted refugee status, but was then lured to Zimbabwe for a college education, only to endure much suffering that included the loss of academic opportunity. Zimbabwe has taken more than five years to determine his refugee status application, so he has no state ID. That means he's also been barred from using Western Union, MoneyGram, or World Remit. To pay Stephen for the poems and stories he writes, he asks us to send sixty euros by Western Union to his friend in the camp, a woman Stephen trusts, and she collects the payment using her state ID. Then she gives the cash to Stephen. Another author in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya helps his neighbors through a similar process, though he has access through World Remit to receive money on his mobile phone, which he cashes out and passes along to the relevant author. Many authors that we work with combine payments, waiting to publish three stories instead of one before receiving funds to make fewer trips to town, and/or they combine payments with one another, hoping to decrease their fees.

As we try to escape the marketplace that obstructs so many writers from reaching audiences, we simultaneously create a system that insists on paying authors—and RAEs—for their reading and writing. The irony of bringing payment into the polity will never go away, no matter how focused we stay on our own practices of reading, advising, and editing. Perhaps, just like RAEs, writers, too, wish that they could say "please speak to the accountant" when it comes to money. Perhaps all of us, RAEs and writers, wish that we could focus only on writing and reading. And yet even as we are forced to think, worry about, and attend to matters of money, a typical day in The GOAT PoL involves writers from across the globe writing and sharing their stories with the RAEs, first of all, and, after publication, with an unknown number of strangers who find the story on our map. Even as their writing tells us more about their lives, the one constant is that what they've experienced is largely unknown to us. Similarly, we cannot fully understand what the payment means to each individual writer, nor can we ignore that this payment affects their relationship to The GOAT PoL, if not their relationship with us. A typical day for a writer on The GOAT PoL might include excitement about payment, but we can only imagine it must always be about something else, too: that precise feeling that comes when we've shared with others what we know to be important.

Notes

1. There are many other components of The GOAT PoL that readers of *Community Literacy Journal* might find compelling. For example, there is no “house style,” so that a RAE works with a writer independently from any other writer/RAE relationship. We also publish pieces in infinite “Englishes,” supporting an author’s language as it operates in their contexts. To learn more about the origins and spirit behind this project, see Matthew Stadler’s essay “Goat Literature: A Future PoL” and visit the site at <https://thegoatpol.org>.

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Author Bios

Audrey Simango is a freelance food journalist who joined The GOAT PoL as a RAE in August 2022. She has worked with several publishers and her journalism reports have been online published in *Remedy Health Media* (Thebody.com USA), *New Internationalist* (England), and *The South Africa.com* (South Africa), *Newsweek* magazine, *The Africa Report* (Paris), and *iAfrikan News*. She is also a food engineer, currently based in Zimbabwe.

Matthew Stadler is a writer and editor, the author of the novels *Allan Stein, Landscape: Memory*, *The Dissolution of Nicholas Dee*, and *The Sex Offender*. He is the recipient of Guggenheim and Ingram-Merrill fellowships, a Whiting Writer's Award, and a United States Artists fellowship. He edits the Fellow Travelers Series of books and is the founder and a Reader/Advisor/Editor at The GOAT PoL. He lives in Rotterdam and Seattle.

Alison Turner has been a RAE with The GOAT PoL since the summer of 2022. She is a member of the editorial collective for Coda, the creative section in *Community Literacy Journal*, and has a collection of short stories forthcoming with Torrey House Press. She is an ACLS Leading Edge postdoctoral fellow at Operation Shoestring in Jackson, Mississippi, where she is working on a community-based oral history project.