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## 2017 Conference on Community Writing Keynote Address: Place and Relationships in Community Writing

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## 2017 Conference on Community Writing Keynote Address: Place and Relationships in Community Writing

*Ellen Cushman*

I would like to thank Veronica and the CCW conference organizers for their leadership in making this wonderful conference possible and for inviting me to speak with you today. I also want to acknowledge the land we stand on today as the ancestral lands of the Nunt'zi (Ute) and Hinonoeino (Arapahoe) peoples. I've been inspired by the research and teaching we've heard in presentations and by the willingness you all have demonstrated time and again to create inclusive classrooms and communities. My talk today is aimed at helping us think through the kinds of discourse in our classrooms and communities that help to support the everyday work of border crossing and place-based learning to build community writing relationships. So much of national public discourse is mired in division and divisiveness. When the people who are our very role models for civic dialogue have sunk to new lows in the ways in which they speak with each other and the ways in which they speak about the peoples whom they ostensibly serve, it matters more than ever to think through the types of civically sustainable dialogue that can be used to foster inclusive ecologies and broadened personal networks.

If the 2016 election process, results, and subsequent public discourse are any indication, around 60 million people in this country seem to feel alienated when it comes to questions of diversity and inclusion. I suspect this happens for a few reasons. Maybe they don't see themselves as having an identity that is based on the notion of peoplehood as broadly inclusive of many peoples, but believe in a sense of citizenship and nationalism that tacitly assumes multi-tiered subtypes of belonging and elevates white Anglophones (Barreto and Lozano). And so, they think of "diversity" and "inclusion" as something that only people of color need—as thinly-veiled institutional initiatives to re-package affirmative action and take away opportunities from presumably more-deserving candidates. Maybe they have bought into the narrative of meritocracy, that Americans have so many opportunities. If only 'these people' would work a little bit harder, the thinking goes, they could get ahead. And certainly, we've seen the return of open expressions of purely racist, social Darwinist vitriol from people who want to re-inscribe their narrative of white supremacy. For those people, the validation of their tradition must necessarily entail the degradation of other traditions. What is to be done?

I'm not calling for a return to neoliberal understandings of public rhetoric. That rhetoric itself, based as it is on the good man speaking well from a particularly Western tradition, returns us only to a patriarchal and paternalistic understanding of democracy. I am talking about a public discourse and method used to strengthen inclusive communities and pluriversal institutions. Civic sustainability is a state

of harmonious, peaceful, and balanced everyday life within complex societies. When present, civic sustainability produces resilience, or peoples' perseverance, in complex societies and fosters an optimal learning environment for all.

### *Civic Sustainability: A Definition*

Civic sustainability is based on four methods for developing place-based relationships in everyday border-crossing interactions in community literacy classrooms and research projects:

- ▶ Hold each other's differences in the highest regard
- ▶ Acknowledge long-standing inequities
- ▶ Act in good faith to broaden personal networks and to address biases
- ▶ Seek common grounds for shared action

In community-based research and teaching, civic sustainability creates a culture of inclusion through discourse and research methods that stem from these four operating principles. In a very real way, then, community-based research and teaching becomes a microcosm for the learning ecologies and networks we hope to inspire, especially in this time of great division, uncertainty, and cultivation of fear of others.

Civic sustainability may offer one avenue for redressing divisive public discourse, but how to enact this? For the remainder of my talk today, I'd like to offer some insights gathered from my research on Cherokee language manuscripts over the last ten years. In what follows, I focus on a small selection of phrases drawn from a broadside entitled "Cherokee Life Ways" that has hung in my office for years now. Along the way, I'll step inside my experiential liberal arts classrooms and literacy research to illustrate my claims. At the end of the talk, I will return again to this idea of civic sustainability and situate it within decolonial theory to consider what types of networks and ecologies might foster alternatives to Western Modernity's linguistic, social, and institutional hierarchies (see Mignolo for more on modernity and the hierarchies maintained in its processes and everyday practices).

This broadside, titled "Cherokee Life Ways," was created during Chad Smith's tenure as Chief of the Cherokee Nation from 1999-2011. The language and Sequoyan that informs this poster was offered by Chief Smith's relative, Benny Smith, the brother of a prominent medicine man and former Associate Dean of Students at Haskell Indian Nations University. The poster itself begins with the Cherokee word "ᏍᏍᏉ /gadugi/ people coming together and working" and is followed by twenty phrases written in Sequoyan. "ᏍᏍᏉ /gadugi/ People coming together and working" was a central theme of Chief Smith's oath of office taken in 2003 at the inauguration of Cherokee Nation officials ("Chief Stresses").

With the addition of the prefix ᏆᏄ /s/ to the beginning of ᏍᏍᏉ /gadugi/, the word takes on additional meaning, encompassing words such as community, county, district, state, territory, and federation. ᏆᏄᏍᏍᏉ /sgadugi/ as a concept allows us to visualize how it is that everyday interactions of people working together as teams can, over time, lay the foundations for ever larger systems of governance. Gradually, systems of governance emerge—true governance by and for people working together toward

shared goals. What does ᏍᏍᏍ /gadugi/ look like in practice (Cushman, “Gadugi”)? It’s as though the creators of this broadside anticipated your question, because the phrases that follow offer dozens of instances of precisely what this looks like. And what it looks like, I’m arguing, is a civically sustainable discourse that we can use to create inclusive ecologies and broadened personal networks by humanizing community-based research and teaching, setting high expectations, modeling mutual support, and persevering.

### *Humanizing Relationships in Community Literacy Projects*

Let me open with the ways we can understand civic sustainability within community-based research and teaching as fundamentally related to humanizing each other in the classroom. I’m drawing upon three concepts within the Cherokee Life Ways broadside which serve to illustrate ᏍᏍᏍ.

ᏲᏱᏱᏱ ᏍᏍᏍᏱᏱᏱᏱ /ulisgedi detsadayelvsesdi/ treat each other as being important

ᏍᏍᏍᏱᏱᏱᏱᏱᏱᏱ /detsadaligenvdisgesdi/ take responsibility for each other

ᏱᏱᏱ ᏱᏱ ᏍᏍᏍᏱᏱᏱᏱᏱᏱᏱᏱᏱ /naniv yvwi detsitloyasdisgesdi/ include everyone

So how might we go about humanizing relationships in community literacy projects with these three precepts in mind? I’m betting that many writing instructors spend the first few class sessions of each new semester getting to know students by name. I do too. Sometimes I ask my students to share the story of their names as we sit in a circle. If my class has international students, I ask them to share the translation of their names. I follow up by telling students a bit about myself, what challenges me, what I’m passionate about, and one thing I hope to get out of our writing class. I follow that up with a brief writing prompt, asking students to tell me something about themselves: one thing that challenges them, one thing they are passionate about, and one thing they hope to get out of our writing class.

In the next class session, I use their answers to this writing prompt as the basis for three activities: I post a slide listing all of the things the students are passionate about, including one more thing that I am passionate about, and then we walk around the room until we have connected at least three passions with three different individuals. In the next activity, I post a slide that lists everything that challenges us. By this time, we are getting honest with each other. As students read everything that challenges them, I ask them to say a little bit about what surprises them about these challenges. We end the class with a slide showing what we hope to get out of this class experience together. Together we discuss connections between these passions, challenges, and ambitions in light of the goals that I have stated in the syllabus.

Much of the same practice happens in community research, though the agreements aren’t necessarily written down. In *The Struggle and the Tools* and elsewhere, I’ve written about my own missteps along the way to building relationships. My most

recent misstep happened when trying to introduce myself in Cherokee at a language immersion class. I said, “Dᵒᵒ ᵐᵒᵒᵒᵒᵒᵒᵒᵒ” /aya didadeyohvsgi/ and my teacher said that was a really good introduction, except for one thing: it should be “ᵐᵒᵒᵒᵒᵒᵒᵒᵒ” /digadeyohvsgi/. I had been introducing myself in the third person “myself s/he/it teaches” and it should have been “myself I teach,” roughly translated. He pronounced the word for me, then nodded back to me to indicate I should repeat what he said. I repeated it and he nodded, giving me a smile and thumbs up. What’s important here is not the scale of mistake or embarrassment of being corrected in front of a group of people whom I had only met just a few minutes earlier. What was important was that my teacher and I had such familiarity that he felt comfortable enough with me to know that our relationship could weather the public correction. He also knew that I had actually met everyone in the class in our online language class, a fact that had become apparent to us all as we finished our introductions—we all had been in years of classes together, as it turned out! Small mistakes of even one syllable make a great deal of difference in indigenous languages. He and the class patiently waited for me to say ᵐᵒᵒᵒᵒᵒᵒᵒᵒ with perfect pitch and order of syllables before moving on. He was setting the bar high for other students, using my mistake to set a tone for the remainder of class.

### *Setting High Expectations*

Creating shared learning goals does not mean we abdicate responsibility to individual learning goals. Rather, civic sustainability in community-based research and teaching begins with the understanding that we take responsibility for learning about each other and ourselves. It is a fundamental sign of self and mutual respect that we create high goals and set reasonable expectations for each other. This brings me to the Cherokee Lifeway: ᵐᵒᵒᵒᵒᵒᵒᵒᵒ ᵐᵒᵒᵒᵒᵒᵒᵒᵒ /itsisinasi itsehesdi/ live and be very skilled in all areas of life. Indeed, it’s more crucial than ever that we consider ourselves, community members, and our students to be striving to be very skilled in many areas of life. If we are to be more fully human, we need to understand ourselves as continually learning, growing, and changing.

Through our interactions with each other inside of classrooms and outside of classrooms, at conferences or workshops, at home or in our communities, we help each other become more skilled in more areas of life. In some respects, finding the meaningfulness in writing prompts is one way in which our students and we can begin to be more skilled in more areas of life (Eodice et al.). When I ask students to reflect on the writing prompt and what it is that they have learned from it, I ask them to frame this in terms of who it is they hope to be or are becoming, and how it is that this writing prompt has served as a steppingstone in their personal journey of becoming skilled in all areas of life. My writing prompts early in the semester can be frustratingly open-ended to students: propose the paper you want to write; apply X theory to Y content of your choice; tell me the story of your learning pathway. To help structure the objectives for that writing prompt, I asked students to explain how what



We construct the peer review as a time to visit with one another about the ideas we're trying to express. We frame this as a time to listen to each other and to talk through what it is that we are hearing the other person saying. To facilitate that culture of visiting one another with love, strengthening one another with encouraging words, and directing one another in the best way or good ways, I create a rubric based on the best peer review practices that we have developed together and then grade their peer reviews. The grades then help me encourage them to further engage with each other. The peer review becomes a time to converse about learning through listening to what each other has written, asking if what was written matches what the writer was trying to say. The peer review becomes a cornerstone of creating a civically sustainable discourse in an inclusive ecology and broadened personal network.

With community partners, creating civically sustainable discourse means always sharing stories and initial interpretations of findings. Story is a relationship—a right and an obligation (Cushman, “Wampum, Sequoyan, and Story”). It's to be heard, understood, and returned back to communities. Stories serve to direct each other in better ways. A story is a loving visit with one another—the promise to listen, to reflect, and to pass along with encouraging words. I'll never forget the time when I was feeling a bit small because I was being teased in a group about my Cherokee nickname: Squirrel. “Mmm, good eats,” someone joked; “That's because you're here and there so quick. Never stopping for more than a quick minute,” another said. “I think it's the hair.” Benny Smith pulled me aside and told me the best thing I know about squirrels: he told me they're keepers of the woods, planters of trees. No woods would be possible without them. Before there were any settlers, when we were part of the Iroquois, a squirrel could run from tree to tree, with no break in the canopy, all the way from the East coast to the Midwest. They keep the trees. He paused and added: no wonder you're a teacher.

He strengthened me with encouraging words and a story I'd never heard before. And in doing so, he helped me persevere when I was made to feel small and insignificant.

### *Perseverance*

No classroom or community literacy project is immune to the dreaded downward spiral. I know no teacher or community literacy researcher who hasn't experienced this phenomenon. Maybe you know this: it's when you've had one, maybe two, or maybe three tough discussions in class or interactions with community members. Or it can sometimes happen when students have received their first rounds of grades or you and community members hit an unforeseen challenge that seems like a real roadblock toward accomplishing your goals. These are the times when students' and community members' faith in themselves, each other, and in us sinks: for students and community members, this loss of confidence can lead to alienation, non-responsiveness, avoidance, silence, downward gazes, slumped shoulders, and an unwillingness to participate. For community writing scholars, the downward spiral of a few difficult discussions or less-than-ideal interactions can challenge our confidence, maybe even

lead us to question the faith we have in our abilities or make us less sure about our assignments and methods.

This downward spiral can lead to a growing feeling of dissonance, where the challenge of teaching and working with communities or students feels beyond our skill sets. Or maybe the downward spiral comes to be generalized to a particular type of person with whom you just can't agree. And that type of person becomes the very person one may be tempted to give up on anyway—someone who will never be agreeable or who always questions you, your ideas, or your intentions. It doesn't take more than two or three interactions like that to make everyone lose confidence in the teamwork toward a shared goal.

So how do we pull out of the downward spiral? How do we learn from the class in which our goals for inclusion and civically sustainable dialogue have just not worked? Conferences like the Conference on Community Writing help to rejuvenate and reflect, to get some distance and think about what we can do differently, and to talk with some other colleagues who may have experienced the same thing and may give us the perspective of their expertise and experience. One of the main lessons of *SSY* as a way of building civic sustainability relationships in our places comes into play: perseverance.

EGPC̄ ႠႠႠႠႠႠ ႠႠႠႠႠ /gvwalitsv ditsadayohisdi/ live and never  
give up  
ႠႠႠႠ ႠႠႠႠႠႠ /ditsaligo itsehesdi/ live and work as a team  
SGCB4ႠႠႠ /detsatlisvhesdi/ having strength to continue

One of the best lessons I've ever learned from my Cherokee elders is to go easy on myself. For a long time, that was a difficult lesson for me to learn. I set really high expectations for myself, and when I fail to meet them, I am the first one to judge myself harshly. It's hard for me to remember when a class goes so badly that teaching is a practice. It's a draft. It's something that takes many iterations to get right. The best that we can do is to live and never give up. To search for ways that we can live and work as a team and grow together as stronger teachers. To remind each other of our shared goals and classroom agreements. To reestablish the spirit of our classroom agreements and remind each other of what it is we're trying to accomplish. To have strength to continue into next semester and meet a whole new group of students, all of whom we hope to include in a rewarding and uplifting learning environment that we create together. So it is that we have done over the last few days at this conference.

### *Final Thoughts*

I've been trying to illustrate the ways in which Cherokee understandings can help us realize a civically sustainable discourse necessary for inclusive ecologies and for building relationships across diverse communities. And now I want to return to one of my earlier claims concerning civic sustainability in everyday discourse.

1. **Hold each other's differences in the highest regard.** This is a demonstration of mutual respect and an acknowledgment of the importance of the stories we



tell and the languages we use to tell the stories. It's a recuperation of the humanizing effects of education and a recalibration of classroom discourse. And it allows for our students and ourselves to learn from each other, to recognize that the knowledges that we have are equally important, and to recognize that the knowledge is produced and generated through reading and writing that disciplines us in very particular ways through particular genres and discursive practices.

2. **Acknowledge long-standing inequities that mark our places of learning.** As we begin to hold each other's differences in the highest regard and practice it in our classrooms, we begin to epistemically delink from the ways in which differences have been created in the first place. Acknowledging inequities and conceding injustices begins to surface the invisible social, institutional, linguistic, and epistemic hierarchies that all of us are situated within and through which all of us are assigned greater or lesser value. These hierarchies have their roots in the disciplining mission of education, with its emphasis on tracks, comparative assessment, competition, and grades. They have their roots in the longstanding divides between communities and universities, places marked by institutions on hills, across rivers or train tracks, or on large tracks of wooded land isolated from surrounding urban blight. Civic sustainability in classroom discourse shifts the disposition to do better than everyone else to a disposition of constantly striving to do one's own personal best and to help everyone around do their own personal bests.
3. **Act in good faith to broaden personal networks and to address biases.** Along the way, there will be missteps where we say things that we perhaps don't even realize are implicitly biased, hurtful, or replicate stereotypes. It is then that we realize the power of words to harm. It is also then that we can realize the power of words to sustain. When a writing classroom has agreements in which people can acknowledge each other with mutual support and respect, we can potentially come to better understand and begin the long work in earnest of addressing the ways in which we are all replicating and struggling within the colonial matrices of power.
4. **Seek common grounds for shared action.** When we hold each other's differences in highest regard, acknowledge long-standing inequities, and address our biases, we can begin the work of identifying common concerns and goals for shared action. We can begin to persevere together in learning to unlearn through writing, in learning to express ourselves meaningfully to a variety of audiences, and in learning how to use writing to transform knowledge and potentially solve problems.

In community-based research and teaching, civic sustainability creates a culture of inclusion through everyday discourse that stems from these four operating principles. In a very real way, then, community-based research and teaching becomes a microcosm for the types of public discourse we hope to inspire, especially in this time of great division, uncertainty, and cultivation of fear of others. I think there are two im-

plications for civic sustainability as a means for helping community writing teachers and scholars imagine alternatives to modernity.

Civically sustainable discourse fosters inclusion and perseverance in two ways: first, this discourse enables epistemic delinking, which acknowledges past injustices created in the imperial difference. Each and every person in modern global societies is assigned a particular value based on their positions within the social, epistemic, and institutional hierarchies created in the colonial matrices of power. These positions have been created through theologies and governance structures that were previously based on great-chain-of-being thought, originally conceptualized by Plato and Aristotle and developed more fully in medieval Christianity as decreed by God, ranks all peoples, animals, minerals, and plants hierarchically as having more or less worth. These positions have also been created in more modern forms of that thinking that rationalize the maintenance of hierarchies based on evolution, merit, or intelligence. Civically sustainable discourse begins with the recognition that these hierarchies dehumanize us all to greater or lesser extent. Once we realize and acknowledge that we are all caught in this web of modernity that has dehumanized us all, we're in a position to epistemically delink—to change the structuring tenets of our thought and to guide our actions differently (Mignolo).

Civically sustainable discourse fosters inclusion and perseverance in a second way: it enables a mutually sustaining understanding of peoplehood, a framing necessary to facilitate the shared effort of creating inclusive ecologies and broadened personal networks. Peoplehood is an understanding that all peoples have language, histories, ceremonies, and lands that together make them uniquely identifiable as a people (Holm et al.). The understanding of peoplehood acknowledges the ways in which all of us are fundamentally human and tied to our families, our place, our histories, and our ceremonies. Remember how I opened this talk by acknowledging the ancestral homes of the Nunt'zi and Hinonoeino, the Ute and Arapahoe? I do so to remind us that the story of this Nation is the peoplehood story of settler colonialists. U.S. history is a story of one type of peoplehood against which other traditions have been identified as lesser. But if we all understand ourselves as being of particular 'peoples,' we can begin to create the pluriversal possibility of one alternative to modernity: we all have stories, ways of being, ways of finding meaningfulness, and ways of identifying with place. There are over 560 federally recognized nations of people in the United States; millions of peoples from hundreds of countries, and millions of peoples who were brought here against their will and who have persevered through a shared and internally diverse notion of peoplehood. Civic sustainability allows groups of peoples to respect the autonomy and complexity of all of our identities, to tell the stories of shared struggles and histories, to practice our beliefs in ceremonies, to speak many languages, and to recall our relationships to land and place. Civic sustainability as a method for establishing learning communities and community-based writing networks and ecologies may help us to imagine an alternative to modernity's divisive public discourse, a *oDSSV* in America.

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