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## Introduction: Envisioning Engaged Infrastructures for Community Writing

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# Introduction: Envisioning Engaged Infrastructures for Community Writing

*Veronica House, Seth Myers, and Shannon Carter, Editors*

We proudly present this special issue of *Community Literacy Journal* on “Building Engaged Infrastructure.” Our vision for this collection begins with the inaugural Conference on Community Writing (CCW), which took place at the University of Colorado Boulder in October 2015<sup>1</sup> and attracted 350 scholars, students, activists, and community members representing forty-two states, three countries, 152 colleges and universities, and forty-eight community organizations. This large group was drawn to a vision of higher education that connects with local, national, and international communities by using writing for education, public dialogue, and social change.

The overwhelming response to the conference underscored a desire by those working in community writing (a growing subfield within rhetoric and composition that includes genres such as service learning, community-based research, community literacy, community publishing, advocacy and activist writing, and more) to have opportunities to network, share best practices, and receive mentoring. This event brought together academics and community members to explore the relationships between communication, writing, and social action. According to CCW founding chair Veronica House, a conference goal was “to build a national network of people, ideas, resources, and support structures—an engaged infrastructure—to make the work we do in and about our communities more sustainable, impactful, rewarding, and rewarded.”<sup>2</sup> In the pages that follow, we turn our attention to the scholarship and practice of community writing that emerged from, or was reflected in, presentations and conversations at CCW.

We realize, and want to highlight in this special issue, the obstacles, challenges, and paradoxes of working in community writing. For one, as the astute reader will no doubt notice, definitions of community range widely. The same is true for what counts as writing. An exploration of engagement and infrastructure is no less complex. However, we believe that the inclusion of multiple viewpoints, and the deferral of a precise definition of terms, effectively identifies the fluid boundaries of this thing we call “community writing.” Those who attended CCW, or previous events like the 2008 “Imagining Community Literacy” meeting in Philadelphia and the 2011 “Writing Democracy” conference in Commerce, Texas<sup>3</sup>, or who are energized by work that engages the ethics and populations outside of the traditionally defined borders of the university share enthusiasm for engaged work and an optimistic belief that the study and practice of writing can lead to a more just world. We also share concerns about the risks embedded in this work. In April 2016, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) published an official “Position

Statement on Community-Engaged Projects in Rhetoric and Composition,”<sup>4</sup> whose ultimate goal is “to make visible and measurable the intellectual richness and value community-engaged work brings to academe.” Given the important role we believe this statement can play in helping us build engaged infrastructures for community writing on our own campuses, we are delighted to publish it in this special issue.<sup>5</sup>

Still, differences across community writing are no less common than they are in any other field. Local conditions, for example, regularly determine the shape of projects and outcomes. Thus, while all of the following essays address community writing specifically, they do so in ways that reject the notion that our commonality is a stable, and therefore exclusionary, subfield. The pieces that follow demonstrate that community writing struggles first with self-definition, even as that definition is continually and intentionally elided. We do not insist on a unified definition but rather embrace its necessary fluidity.

The conference theme and the theme for this special issue, “building engaged infrastructure,” was influenced by Jeff Grabill’s scholarship on infrastructures, which, he explains, “enact standards, they are activity systems, and they are also the people themselves” (40). As such, infrastructures are both constrained by external forces and (re)created by the people, places, and communities most directly involved. The infrastructures we work to create are, perhaps paradoxically, unstable: fluid and dynamic, adaptive and tactical, diverse and inclusive. Like Veronica House argued in her CCW Chair’s Address, the corporatization of our universities and the perpetual news cycles insisting on higher education’s “irrelevance” threaten and challenge community-engaged work in real, significant ways. Yet the oppressive conditions that threaten community writing make such work essential and offer the opportunity for extraordinary inventiveness. Indeed, as Paula Mathieu states in her critical book, *Tactics of Hope*, “to acknowledge the present as radically insufficient is a hopeful action, when acting as a prerequisite for future actions and imaginings” (19). The essays here suggest ways in which we might work from within this radically insufficient system toward House’s call to “catalyze an evolution of the university”—one that not only challenges the barriers between colleges and universities and the communities of which they are a part but effectively trains, hires, and supports community writing students, teachers, and scholars, whose efforts are too often undervalued within traditional academic systems of risks and rewards.

The fourteen essays that make up this issue help tease out the complexities involved in building engaged infrastructures by providing a rich historical context, theoretical frameworks, and practical models for this important work. Our most basic and primary objective in this special issue is to feature the work of these scholars and practitioners that inventively represents what it can mean to build engaged infrastructures for community writing. In doing so, we identify four major themes informing what we mean by “engaged infrastructures” and how our field may build, sustain, understand, assess, critique, and revise them.

## Relationships

First, we find the recurring emphasis on *relationships* particularly compelling: between colleagues, partners, mentors and mentees, students and teachers, writing programs and communities, and even oppressors and oppressed. Our contributors offer ways to cultivate these relationships while cautioning against the potential for rigidity and hegemony in infrastructure. The relationships articulated in these pieces also address questions of affective sustainability, exhaustion, support, and other concerns. In his discussion of oppositional politics, Steve Parks asks in *Gravyland*, “How . . . does a project gain strength to last longer than a moment? How does a project move from resisting a previous system to creating a new one?” (50). The “engaged infrastructures” historicized, theorized, and modeled in this collection offer compelling answers to community writing’s durability within and beyond the academy.

This special issue opens with an essay that traces the historical context and relationships from which we work. In “‘Write. Persist. Struggle’: Sponsors of Writing and Workers’ Education in the 1930s,” Deborah Mutnick provides community writing with the historical underpinnings often elided by treatments of service-learning and community engagement. Her description of movements of the “literary left” in America in the 1930s sheds light on the forebears of this kind of work. Illuminating the rich history of the Federal Writer’s Project, Mutnick argues that understanding the history of community writing is essential to moving it forward.

Jennifer Clifton, Jordan Loveridge, and Elenore Long challenge community writing’s development as a subfield, especially in terms of a community’s complex and often difficult relationship to a university. In “A Constructive Approach to Infrastructure: Infrastructure ‘Breakdowns’ and the Cultivation of Rhetorical Wisdom,” the authors theorize the relationships between infrastructure and rhetorical wisdom in order to argue for building an engaged infrastructure while remaining continuously mindful to maintain the differences and dissensuses of counterpublics, whose ideas the potential rigidity of infrastructure may stifle. They argue that those moments of dissensus or breakdown in an infrastructure are the very moments where communities may become most inventive and constructive. Thus, they urge for vigilance in working toward not only what is possible but what ought to be possible.

In “Cultivating the Flow of Community Literacy,” CCW keynote speaker Paul Feigenbaum turns our attention to the importance of relationships in community literacy work. Where Mutnick historicized the notion of “community writing” and Clifton, Long, and Loveridge provided a theoretical framework for engaged infrastructure, Feigenbaum argues that a “flow-cultivation milieu” is the key to a successful infrastructure. In doing so, he offers three critical concepts for us to consider in the building of an engaged infrastructure: self-determinism, wise mentorship, and a listening stance. Providing valuable questions, Feigenbaum argues that in building an infrastructure that “enhances, sustains, and further networks” us, we must prize relationships above all else.

In their follow-up article to the edited collection *Unsustainable*, Laurie Cella, Eli Goldblatt, Karen Johnson, Paula Mathieu, Steve Parks, and Jessica Restaino further complicate the concept of relationships, which they also see as central to community writing. Their article in this volume, “The Powerful Potential of Relationships and Community Writing,” weaves their reflections together to offer both caution and hope as community writing teachers and scholars pursue this important though sometimes frustrating work. Through a set of vignettes, the authors provide a refreshing, validating, and ultimately empowering take on our relationships with our community partners and colleagues. They address what they call the “deep valleys” of frustration, loss, and grief that can accompany community partnerships or the jealousies, exhaustion, and burnout that could deter our work. However, each vignette always returns to the joy that comes from enduring and strong relationships. Finally, they remind us of the importance of forging new and diverse relationships with members of our communities who often are marginalized or absent from our discussions.

In the spirit of forging relationships and rhetorical infrastructures across diverse groups, in “Keep Writing Weird: A Call for Eco-Administration and Engaged Writing Programs,” Veronica House encourages community writing practitioners to use theories of distributed, networked writing and ecological systems to help create engaged writing curricula and programs. She argues that these theories can aid community writing and rhetorical scholars in theorizing, teaching, and producing writing to help communities catalyze change at behavioral and policy levels. Her writing program’s work to support community literacy around the local food movement in Boulder County, Colorado, provides a model for an ecological writing curriculum.

Where House articulates a theoretical framework for an engaged infrastructure in a large writing program, Tobi Jacobi turns our attention to another, quite different example: the SpeakOut program at Colorado State University in partnership with local jails and juvenile rehabilitation centers. In “Against Infrastructure: Curating Community Literacy in a Jail Writing Program,” Jacobi further complicates our understanding of the relationships most fundamental to this work by tracing the seeming futility of building engaged university-community infrastructure in prison literacy programs. “[A]s an alternative to” what she calls the “conventional expectations of growth and reciprocity,” she offers “a participatory curation model . . . that explores the notion of curating a program within an ever-shifting set of artists, regulations, allegiances, and expectations.” Her participatory, flexible model focuses on the *relationships* among people, places, and texts and the inevitable emotional and material dimensions of this work.

## Self-Critique

Second, in addition to encouraging strong relationships, the contributions to this issue challenge our field *to critique our own (potential) roles* in reifying oppressive

forces even as we attempt to dismantle them. In “Unmasking Corporate-Military Infrastructure: Four Theses,” Vani Kannan, Ben Kuebrich, and Yanira Rodríguez offer a strong and important critique of the ways that university-community relations move forward the interests of oppressive institutions while exploiting the people and places they inhabit. They offer a striking comparison between two different university administrations’ approaches to civic and community involvement. The first, they argue, relied on progressive rhetoric but betrayed oppressive outcomes. The second engaged a baldly capitalistic and militaristic understanding of a university’s role. This comparison serves to dismantle some of the assumptions of universities’ community work in order to build new possibilities for more democratic community engagement.

In “From Reciprocity to Interdependence: Mass Incarceration and Service-Learning,” Phyllis Ryder challenges the field of service-learning to engage with the racism and oppression of America’s systemic mass incarceration. She draws heavily from Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* to explore her relationship with a community partner in Washington, DC. Life Pieces to Masterpieces is a program that helps young African American men discover creative expression and the ways that self-expression can serve to re-frame challenging sociopolitical situations. In this exploration, Ryder relies on theories of the intersectionality of oppressor and oppressed, mass incarceration, and a host of social injustices ultimately informed by neoliberal global capitalism. Ultimately, she resists any attempt to forestall further inquiry.

## Applications

Third, this issue includes *course-based applications* that demonstrate what it can mean to build engaged infrastructure through “an engaged swarm” (McCarthy); a progressive model that at once works “within the system” while working directly against it (Parfitt and Shane); theatrical performances (Lariscy); and narrative medicine (Walker).

In “Designing an Engaged Swarm: Toward a *Techne* for Multi-Class, Interdisciplinary Collaborations with Nonprofit Partners,” Seán McCarthy offers an innovative model for community partnerships: *the engaged swarm*. As McCarthy explains, “based on theories that translate the distributed, adaptive, and flexible activity of actors in biological systems to organizational networks that include humans, swarms are well-suited to providing a diverse range of responses to complex problems.” He provides both a case study of the work an “engaged swarm” did for a non-profit as well as a *techne* for readers to coordinate the infrastructure for a swarm at their own institutions.

In “Working within the System: The Effects of Standardized Testing on Education Outreach and Community Writing,” Elizabeth Parfitt and Stephen Shane provide a case study of a partnership between Emerson College students and students of two Boston public high schools that have a majority of low-income

students. Through both qualitative and quantitative measures, the authors assess the effectiveness of teaching genre awareness to high school students, specifically regarding the genre of the state standardized test that would determine their schools' access to resources. In this innovative approach to university-public school partnerships, college and high school students learn about inequalities in the education system while exercising an approach to test taking that is both a rhetorical and a political act.

With her imaginative work both writing and producing plays with marginalized members of her community and composition students at her university, Nichole Lariscy combines Augusto Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed* and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Her snapshot, "Staging Stories that Heal: Boal and Freire in Engaged Composition," describes her work with HIV/AIDS patients, elders with dementia, and prisoners, among others with whom she and her students partner. Together they tell stories, write, produce, and act. Lariscy offers her theoretical influences as well as a detailed methodology for readers interested in Theater's intersection with writing and community.

Allison Walker moves the conversation around community writing toward the intersection of humanities and healthcare in her snapshot, "Narrative Medicine: Community Poetry Heals Young and Old." Her piece describes her program that takes students to a nursing home in order to promote creative writing as a means for listening—the key concept of narrative medicine. Participants in this program engage in community writing not as writing for community but to create community.

## Professional Development

Finally, we turn to the *professional development* of graduate students (Mathis, Hartline, Boehm, and Sheridan) and faculty (Savini) to help build support and resources for engaged work. In "Building Infrastructures for Community Engagement at the University of Louisville: Graduate Models for Cultivating Stewardship," Keri E. Mathis, Megan Faver Hartline, Beth A. Boehm, Mary P. Sheridan offer a model for graduate student community writing projects. These projects serve to make community engagement more visible to the university and provide what Sheridan and Rowsell call "architectures of participation" that deepen and expand the traditional expectations for graduate studies. Too often, the authors point out, the apprenticeship model of graduate education elides the contemporary need for flexible and directly applicable scholarship. The two programs they describe move away from this model and offer examples of how graduate programs may embrace the needs and contributions of community.

Whereas Mathis, Hartline, Boehm, and Sheridan focus on training for graduate students, Catherine Savini considers the training needed for faculty in a Writing Across the Curriculum program. In "A Writing Retreat at the Intersection of WAC and Civic Engagement," Savini argues for the benefits of building relationships between community engagement work and the work of Writing Across the

Curriculum efforts. She argues that expanding traditional WAC projects to include community engagement can illuminate the ways in which literacy is imbricated with social (in)justice. Savini's writing retreat effectively leveraged a WAC model of faculty engagement to support the ends and means for expanding community engagement values across her campus' curricula.

CCW keynote speaker Eli Goldblatt writes in *Because We Live Here*, "Once we have considered the underlying principles, the specific instances [of community engagement] begin to look less like an array of random but well-meaning projects and more like multiple manifestations of a single vision" (148-49). As editors of this special issue, we see these essays as contributing to an expansive vision for what engaged infrastructure means and represents. Together, they illustrate the many ways in which "community writing exists as an evolving, dynamic part of our specific locale and of the complex and interconnected global ecosystem" (House).

## Notes

1. For more information, see [communitywriting.org](http://communitywriting.org).
2. This call built upon similar efforts, which helped pave the way for CCW's success. In 2008, Eli Goldblatt and Steve Parks invited a group of about 20 leaders in community writing to a gathering in Philadelphia called "Imagining Community Literacy,"—an event designed as a first step toward some kind of meaningful, sustainable collaboration. In 2011, Shannon Carter and Deborah Mutnick called for a political turn in composition studies and founded the Writing Democracy project, envisioning a revived New-Deal Era Federal Writers' Project that likewise connected community-engaged projects across the country. To this end, they hosted a conference of about 150 librarians, public historians, community leaders, and teachers and scholars from our field and beyond at Texas A&M-Commerce in March 2011 and have held pre-conference workshops at the CCCCs every year since. In July 2012, Michelle Hall Kells hosted about 25 leading scholars in community literacy in Santa Fe, New Mexico, for the Summit of the National Consortium of Writing Across Communities. Clearly, the desire to establish a collaborative unit of some kind is high.
3. See <https://writingdemocracy.wordpress.com>
4. This Statement is available at <http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/community-engaged>
5. The committee involved in revising the Position Statement published in April 2016 consisted of Shannon Carter, Jenn Fishman, Eli Goldblatt, Paula Mathieu, and Pete Vandenberg.



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## Author Bios

**Dr. Veronica House** is Associate Faculty Director for Service-Learning and Outreach in the Program for Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Colorado Boulder. She founded CU's Writing Initiative for Service and Engagement (WISE), and has coordinated the Program for Writing and Rhetoric's transformation into one of the only writing programs in the country to offer community-based learning throughout its lower- and upper-division curriculum. She received the university's Women Who Make a Difference Award, the writing program's Award for Excellence and Innovation in Teaching, and Campus Compact's Engaged Scholarship Award. Veronica is proud to serve on the board of *The Shed: Boulder County Foodshed*, which works to promote healthy, affordable local food production and education. She teaches and writes about food, sustainability, and local literacy campaigns.

**Dr. Seth Myers** is an instructor at the University of Colorado Boulder. He works closely with Dr. House on a number of projects, but his research interests center around digital action research and the ways that such work can illuminate the relationships between electronic technologies, communities, institutions, ethics, and justice.

**Shannon Carter**, Professor of English at Texas A&M University-Commerce, has worked closely with African American alumni to recover and circulate stories of racial justice efforts in the 1960s and 1970s in her then recently desegregated university near Dallas, Texas. When she began this work in 2009, these stories were absent from public memory. In response, she has collaborated with campus librarians, alumni, and graduate students to collect oral history interviews, establish relevant public programming events, and created and screened documentaries and related digital humanities projects. This was supported, in part, by special campus funding and a grant from the National Endowment for the Human-

ities. Her work has appeared in *College English*, *CCC*, and *CLJ*. In March 2011, with Deborah Mutnick, she established the Writing Democracy Project with a national conference held on her campus. The special issue of *Community Literacy Journal* emerging from this conference won the Council of Editors of Learned Journals 2011 Best Public Intellectual Special Issue. Her second book project, "Writing Democracy in East Texas: Circulating Resistance in a Rural University Town" traces rhetorical constructions of race and civic engagement at her university from 1889 to the present.