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Keyword Essay: Place-Based Literacies

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that govern their daily lives.” Anthony Boynton’s review likewise takes a stand for historically marginalized communities to examine how Linda Spears-Bunton and Rebecca Powell’s *Toward a Literacy of Promise: Joining the African American Struggle* invites scholars and teachers of the rhetoric of social change to embrace critical literacy as a “humanizing force and a vehicle for political participation and citizenry.” Finally, this issue’s keyword essay “Place-Based Literacies” by Rosanne Carlo explores recent scholarship in urban and rural literacy studies to highlight how community literacy researchers and practitioners are actively shaping and transforming the social and ecological realities of their neighborhoods and institutions through non-dominant “world-making and world-revealing practices.”

Keyword Essay: Place-Based Literacies

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Practicing community outreach and research—alongside writing community scholarship—requires an attention to place in the present, as a literal site of practice with material conditions. It also requires an attention to place in the past and future, as an imaginary as well as historical engagement of what a place once was for people and what it has yet to become. Literacy work is, as Paulo Freire describes, a “constant unveiling of reality” (8) toward the end of creating “revolutionary futurity” (10). Explained in more concrete terms, when “people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world and *with which* and *in which* they find themselves” then they can begin to transform their reality, both ecologically and socially (Freire 9). Community work and scholarship continually unveils reality to change and shape it, and this process is a form of place-making.

It is hard to separate the words of education and community scholars from the locations through and in which they write; location is not a backdrop for abstract theories of literacy, but it is the source of those investigations. For example, rural Nebraska and its prairie shapes Robert Brooke’s reflections on place-conscious education as a way to create responsive citizens (*Rural Voices: Place-Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing*); Harlem’s crowded streets after a show at the Apollo are the rhythms behind Valerie Kinloch’s arguments for a critical stance toward gentrification and loss of black culture (*Harlem on Our Minds: Place, Race, and the Literacies of Urban Youth*); and the urban community college campus with an open admissions policy—its students formerly academic outsiders, now moving from their worlds of work, to home, to school—underlie Ira Shor’s calls for a critical pedagogy that works to transform social inequalities (*Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*). It is not hard to think of several other place-based writings and educational theories in composition and community literacy scholarship.

This discussion of community literacy work and place reminds us of how Anne Ruggles Gere drew attention to the “extracurricular”—or places beyond the university—where we find literacy at work. In her article, now over twenty years old, she writes, “They [writers] may gather in rented rooms in the Tenderloin, around kitchen tables in Lansing, Iowa, or in a myriad of other places to write their worlds. The question remains whether we will use classroom walls as instruments of separation or communication” (91). The answer, if I can be so bold as to claim one, is now here—the “extracurricular” is becoming the curricular as more educators are advocating for place-based literacies under names like service-learning, place-conscious education, ecomposition and ecopedagogy, and urban and rural literacy studies. These subfields, of course, are not one in the same as they draw on

scholarship from different disciplines with different methods and different ways of making (and counting) knowledge, and yet, there is a central theme here—the study of place as unveiling and shaping social and ecological reality.

Place-based literacies and their attention to how location creates possibilities for world-revealing and world-making practices, particularly in the sense of community development and literate practices, are now a dominant theme in pedagogy, community work, and scholarship. David Gruenewald, in his article “The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place,” offers a definition of the aims of place-based literacies that best describes its world-revealing and making potential when he writes that place pedagogies should “(a) identify, recover, and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments (rehabitation); and (b) identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places (decolonization)” (9). These two aims are what he sees as the goals of place-based education (a) and critical pedagogy (b), and—as his title implies—he wishes for a convergence of these pedagogical approaches rather than to separate them. This synthesis is helpful because it accounts for how place is continually changing and how we need to be aware of and a part of this process. Just like in writing pedagogy, places also continually undergo a process of revision. As community literacy workers, we are in a position to understand and teach this process of revision to students and others so that they can (potentially) participate in acts of place-making.

Furthermore, when places are being revised, there is an impulse, like place-based educators argue, *to conserve*—the land, the culture, the local businesses, the local residents—and there is an impulse, like critical pedagogues argue, *to transform*, to make social reality better for those who have been traditionally marginalized or displaced (whether we are considering place as institution, place as neighborhood, place as city, or place as region). The dialectic of transformation and conservation is one that I want to trace through the scholarship of composition and community scholars when they write about and advocate for place-based literacies. This dialectic has a discourse, a rhetoric, one we must learn and deploy strategically, as compositionists and community literacy workers, in order to impact the lives of students and others with whom we work. In other words, sometimes we have to advocate for the conservation of a place and a current way of life, and other times we need to advocate for the transformation of a place and a new way of life. My intention, in analyzing the conservation and transformation dialectic in relation to this key phrase—place-based literacies—is to draw attention to how literacy work is a form of world-revealing and place-making.

Revision: The Conservation and Transformation of Places

Writing teachers and literacy workers are very cognizant of the revision process. As Adrienne Rich describes, writing is an act of re-vision “of looking-back, of seeing with fresh eyes” (18); revision is about perspective and we often teach our students

to be open to envisioning what is not yet there. Revision is an imaginative labor. This section asks readers to consider our lens of revision in writing in relation to how we understand revision of place. This transference is an act of what Kenneth Burke calls “perspective by incongruity,” a method that “gaug[es] situations by ‘verbal atom cracking.’ That is, a word belongs by custom to a certain category—and by rational planning you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to a different category” (308). Revision in writing studies holds complex meaning because it is associated with process pedagogies. We can think of the struggle over change that we see in our students’ compositions, one where we observe how what is being revised retains elements of its original character or transforms into something entirely different. We offer feedback on this process. How is the process of revision in composition similar to that of revision of place?

There are many examples of scholars discussing revision of neighborhoods, landscapes, and campuses in community literacy and composition scholarship. For example, Jim W. Corder reflects often on the nature of revision (of writing, of place, of ourselves) as both a good and a bad thing. In one of his place-based memoirs, *Yonder: Life on the Far Side of Change*, he asks readers to see revision as inevitable, whether this inevitability is one of nature (erosion) or of human intervention (construction, interaction). In one passage he describes the Croton Breaks, a canyon in West Texas, as a case study of revision. The land has changed in Corder’s lifetime because of wind, water, bulldozing, scraping, and leveling. He writes, “I recognize nothing when I go back,” observing that this revision, “has torn the Canyons outside my knowledge and raped my care” (Yonder 90). Corder bristles at this revision of place, at revision in the writing process, at revision in life, insisting that “the first draft may be all I have” and questioning, “Might we take each other, and the other out there, without revision?” (91). And yet revision, and its inevitability, cannot be ignored or wished away. As Corder notes, revision is always already happening.

The dialectic of conservation and transformation is one we confront whenever we engage in a process of revision; for example, we may be shaping our ideas and putting them into words or deciding how to change our university’s writing curricula or observing or participating in the construction of our landscapes and cityscapes. Revision is a part of engaging in the work of place-based literacies. We want to hold fast to some things, and we want to change some things; holding on and changing, of course, are sometimes out of our purview. Corder wrestles with this inevitability of revision through his remark, “Unrevised, I fail, of course, and get no credit in freshmen composition, or in life” (91). This remark could be read as fatalistic, but it could also be read as realistic. If we—as community literacy scholars and practitioners—note and participate in revision, maybe less will slip out of our purview? Maybe we can conserve what is good around us and we can transform what does not serve our communities? Place-making requires an attentiveness and a critical eye toward revision, and it requires us to be active participants in conservation and transformation.

Community literacy, as Rhonda Davis defines, is taking part in a process of “analyzing and learning from a matrix of *ever-evolving* relationships people and themselves, for better or worse, are embedded within” (emphasis mine, 80). This definition outlines literacy work as socially critical, ecological, and bound in processes of change. Our attention to how discourses form and shape social reality is at the heart of work in writing studies, but—as Nedra Reynolds articulates (See *Geographies of Writing*), scholars may be too focused on discourse. This focus may abstract the real issues and people behind the words, and also may make us less focused on the material conditions of literacy. For place is not a neutral backdrop for human action, a context for rhetorical activity and discourse; it greatly influences—and maybe even generates—communicative acts. In other words, place gives place to literacy practices. In this vein, Thomas Rickert argues in *Ambient Rhetoric* that the work of rhetoric (and literacy) is beyond human agents engaged in speech acts; he writes, that the study of rhetoric “must diffuse outward to include the material environment, things (including the technological), our own embodiment, and a complex understanding of ecological relationality as participating in rhetorical practices and their theorization” (3). We must continue to acknowledge the material dimension of rhetoric and literacy, to see it as an “embodied and embedded practice” (Rickert 34).

The practice of critical pedagogy and scholarship of place requires responsiveness to the dialectic of conservation and transformation. David Gruenewald argues that students “must be challenged to reflect on their own concrete situationality in a way that explores the complex interrelationships between cultural and ecological environments” (6). Being attentive to material conditions makes us aware of how places are changing. And we can respond to these changes—through our scholarship and in our literacy work—by investigating how communities develop in place, how identity development is tied to geography, how emotions circulate in place, how people become excluded through spatial organization, how the local community experiences loss through change, how physical movement (or lack of movement) is undertaken by bodies in place, and many other issues that concern us in the study of place-based literacies.

The following subsections elucidate different strands of work being done in place-based literacy: institutional and home literacies, urban and rural literacies, and eco-literacies. These divisions are made to showcase some of the different case studies and approaches scholars have taken in their recognition of place as a significant part of literacy practices. My aim is to see literacy work as a process of world-revealing and place-making, and further to see the scholarly writings reviewed here as a response to the ever-changing nature of places and the literacy practices that are created within them.

Institutional and Home Literacies

Boundary. This is one of many spatial metaphors to describe the place of basic writers in the academy. The scholarship of the basic writing movement in rhetoric and composition continually emphasizes the ways that students from nontraditional backgrounds are outsiders. Mike Rose’s work on basic writers continues to resonate with composition and community literacy practitioners because he calls attention to the boundary lines, reminding us of the politics of remediation and the ways institutions are set up to displace basic writers (and, de facto, composition as a discipline) from the center of knowledge-making. Rose tries to arrive at a definition of remedial, and says it can be best described as “highly dynamic and contextual” in that labeling something as remedial in the university serves a function: “to keep in *place* the hard fought for, if historically and conceptually problematic and highly fluid, distinction between college and secondary work” (emphasis mine, 349). There is also a boundary that exists, both psychologically and materially, between what counts as knowledge in the academy and the ways of knowing and being that students learn through their home and work life experiences.

Much scholarship in community literacy and composition critiques the way power circulates in institutions and asks us to imagine how the boundary between institutional and home literacies can be less divisive. Institution as place is one site of analysis for place-based literacies. The division is indeed one that has caused oppression, perpetuating racial and class inequalities. Ira Shor defines critical literacy as a process of “questioning received knowledge and immediate experience” (11) in institutions, and for teachers to practice a pedagogy that “constructs students as authorities, agents, and unofficial teachers” (13) in order to empower them to return to their communities and become activists. Critical literacy, then, is situated in institutional and home communities—investigating these sites (and identifying and analyzing the social problems and asset-based epistemologies that circulate therein) is at the center of the curriculum. This approach to place-based literacies is one of transformation. For a further review of works in composition and community literacy scholarship that are critical of institutional organization and power, see Nedra Reynolds’ *Geographies of Writing* as she traces spatial metaphors in the history of rhetoric and composition scholarship (Chapter 1); Glynda Hull and Katherine Schultz’s *School’s Out!: Bridging Out-of-School Literacies with Classroom Practice* as they provide a comprehensive overview of scholarship about out-of-school literacies through the frames of ethnography in education, Vygotskian and activity theory, and new literacy studies (Chapter 1); and Christopher J. Keller and Christian R. Weisser’s edited collection, *The Locations of Composition*, particularly the writer contributions in Part III titled “Across the Institution.”

It is important to note how the spatial metaphors to describe basic writers and teaching basic writing are not relics of a bygone time. Basic writers—and these issues in the academy—have not disappeared, even though some of our scholarly attention may have shifted away from them. A more contemporary article that

engages issues of institution as place is Johnathon Mauk's "Location, Location, Location: The 'Real' (E)states of Being, Writing, and Thinking." Here Mauk explains a "contemporary" problem in the university; students, he claims, especially those in two-year colleges, are "unsituated in academic space." The university is not an "integral part" of who they are in the fact that they are not traditional academics (368). Furthermore, he says that many professors view their students as "as uninvolved, uninterested, and unmotivated" because they are too distracted from their studies by outside forces, like their "domestic, workplace, and recreational commitments" (370). The university or college, as place, competes with other locations in students' lives. Mauk claims that professors should not despair about the academic performance of the "new" student population, but rather professors should help students see the work of the academy as applicable to their everyday lives. Rather than "invit[ing] students to move into academic space," (386) professors should move academic space outward so that students can "conceive the space outside of the campus, outside of the classroom, as academic" (380). Although Mauk frames the current student population and their issues as "new," the student population described in older writings, even as far back as Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, sounds eerily similar.

Mauk's writing, rather than advocating for the conservation of the academy, calls for its transformation, in the sense that students should view academic thinking as essential to their everyday lives. Mauk suggests that professors do this through their assignment design, creating assignments that ask students to reflect on their places, such as their neighborhoods, workplaces, and community organizations. By asking students to write about their locations outside school, professors place students within assignments and hopefully this will make them more engaged and critical about their everyday lives (379). Critical pedagogy, Nedra Reynolds contends, is part of composition's "imagined geography" (27) in that it is focused on the transformation of academic space in order to challenge boundaries present in the academy that serve to displace basic writers.

Urban and Rural Literacies

So what about us? People want to gentrify Harlem, they don't care that this our home . . . Lots of us been here all our lives and you telling me somebody's gonna up and take it all away from our reach? Our home, neighbors, parks, even schools! This our home, where we belong.—Philip, *Harlem on Our Minds*

The changes occurring in urban and rural places due to economic development is a large part of what drives scholars in community literacy studies. Urban and rural literacy education helps students and community members respond critically to changes (i.e. gentrification) in order for people to have more agency in their lives.

Philip, a youth who participated in Columbia professor Valerie Kinloch's research, explains from his perspective how place—Harlem in this case—is a part of his identity and how the loss or change of place (due to gentrification) can be harmful to long-time residents. There is a strong sense in urban and rural literacy scholarship that the community should take back and reclaim public spaces. These efforts can be seen through the lens of conservation of place.

Linda Tolbert and Paul Theobald trace place-based education to Vygotskian ideas of social constructivism and Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences. They say that public schools need to create space for urban youth to "work with one another and discover something about the hardships they share living in America's passed-over urban places," and that this work will ultimately develop students' interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences (Tolbert and Theobald 274). Discussing urban class and racial struggles is a part of schooling in a democratic society, one where students may go back to their home communities to work for the rights of people who live there. Tolbert and Theobald describe place-based pedagogy as a process of ". . . enculturation into an ethic of taking pride in one's ability to positively affect the quality of the shared space that a neighborhood represents" (273). Philip displays the pride that Tolbert and Theobald describe in his home, in where he belongs, and this sentiment translates into him taking action in Harlem; in Kinloch's book, for example, she describes how Philip and other youth attend fair housing meetings, protest Columbia University's expansion plans, and create new media texts that advocate for the conservation of places important to black culture. It is important to note how these efforts in neighborhood conservation constitute activism. As Tolbert and Theobald remind teachers, place-based education or service learning is not about "cleaning up a vacant lot," but rather connecting youth with their communities. As Robert Nistler and Angela Maiers describe, schools should provide "opportunities for family and social networks to be formed through activities in schools and communities" (9).

To move from theory of urban literacy to pedagogical practice, Valerie Kinloch's book *Harlem on Their Minds: Place, Race, and Literacies of Urban Youth* is a good resource (see chapter 4) and her article, "Literacy, Community, and Youth Acts of Place-Making," wherein she discusses how students create multimodal projects (i.e. writing, interviewing, videotaping) to address community issues and reach a wider audience with their texts. Lauren Esposito's "Where to Begin? Using Place-Based Writing to Connect Students with their Local Communities" discusses her experience teaching at the community college level in an urban location; she speaks about how she engages students to write about issues in their local communities by having them create public documents, in this case public service announcements (PSAs). Her guiding questions to student writers are particularly helpful, and she touches upon the conservation and transformation of place through them; Esposito writes: "What obligations do you have in these places and to/for whom are you responsible? What roles are you asked to perform and what roles do you choose to perform? Which aspects of these places should remain the same or change?" (72). These questions

highlight the ethical responsibilities students may feel toward their communities and the ways they can choose to respond to them (or not); Esposito asks students to enter into a process of revision of their places through documenting change over time.

Scholars who write about rural literacies possess pedagogical strategies for teaching place-based writing and community projects that are worth reading as they explicitly engage students in reflecting on and imagining places. For example, Robert Brooke and Jason L. McIntosh discuss the concept of teaching “deep mapping,” or having students identify landmarks of significance to them and then having them reflect on the communities and issues within these drawings; they argue that this “active conceptualization of space is a necessary prerequisite to writing *inside, in relationship to, or for* a place” (133). Furthermore, James S. Chisholm and Brandie Trent discuss digital storytelling as a way to engage students in exploring their communities; in particular, they show an example of a student’s photo essay and explain her composing process. They write that digital storytelling gave this student “the opportunity to learn deeply about narrative composition; to author her story, experiment with notions of identity, home, stability, change, and memory; and, finally, to connect these intellectual insights with the emotion that connects these concepts with place” (Chisholm and Trent 315). Both pedagogical articles emphasize the role of emotion for students in connection with their places and also encourage teachers and literacy workers to draw out these reflections in writing and visual projects.

There are also many articles written by educators that encourage place-based pedagogical strategies in teacher preparation programs, specifically for educating students from rural areas (See Ajayi, Eppley, Lester, Lesley and Matthews). Again, these pedagogical strategies are framed through the lens of conservation of rural values. Ajayi’s definition of place-based literacies in teacher preparation is instructive here, as he writes that this pedagogy “connect[s] ELA [English Language Arts] to contextual realities of rural communities” and allows student-teachers to “appreciate what is locally vibrant within the community” helping them “to sustain and preserve” cultural practices and to approach community members as resources and partners in every aspect of teaching and learning (252). Many of the above articles emphasize how teacher preparation curriculum should become more place-based so that teachers can better relate to their students’ lives and further engage their imaginations around issues of place-making. There is a real sense, too, that these students will return to their communities and become advocates for their preservation in the face of economic change.

The scholarship in both urban and rural literacies emphasizes community resources, which are found in the natural surroundings, the local culture, and in the actual members of the community. This asset-based framing for pedagogy and scholarship is one step toward arguing for the conservation of urban and rural places and communities.

Eco-literacies

Place-based literacies are also constructed through the use of metaphors—like network and web—that describe the relationship between people and their environments. These images of place show how it is ecological, constructed of human and non-human elements that continue to influence, or act on and with, each other. For an extensive discussion of the term *ecology*, it is important to reference Janine Morris’ recent keyword essay in *Community Literacy Journal* as she characterizes ecologies as having a “reciprocal nature” that accounts for the “distribution, influence, and movement of organisms within and between environments” (89). Rhonda Davis, author of “A Place for Ecopedagogy in Community Literacy,” adds to this definition as she works to define ecopedagogy; she writes that ecopedagogy recognizes the “reciprocal relationship that involves other people, nonhuman others, the natural environment, and constructed environments” (81). The use of *reciprocal* as an adjective in both these articles here is important because it emphasizes how scholars in this particular area of place-based literacies want to ensure that the environment (natural and built) is seen as a key player in the formation of literacy practices. We can see these ecological theories of composition and literacy as a posthuman response; literacy doesn’t just reside in us, but rather is created and distributed across several actors.

Eco-literacies attempt to map the relationships between people, discourse, and place. Scholars in ecocomposition emphasize how writing always comes from somewhere, that discourse is not some detached entity. Discourse is created through relationships with place that are a “deeply enmeshed, coconstitutive relationship” (Dobrin 18). Sidney Dobrin asserts, “It is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the writing from the place and the place from the writing” (18). Further, Dobrin asserts that writers are as a “part of the web” as we are influenced by context: “it reverberates within us and we reverberate in it. There is no way not to affect the environment and be affected by it” (21). Eco-literacies constantly remind us how our characters and identities are created through place; place shapes us, and we shape it. Indeed, eco-literacies ask for scholars and community literacy workers to be aware of relationships and revisions that occur in ecosystems. This is a part of the *transformation* of place: as human agents, we are one variable in this process of transformation.

For pedagogical application of eco-literacies, see Paul Walker’s article “(Un) earthing a Vocabulary of Values: A Discourse Analysis for Ecocomposition.” Walker offers an analytical method through which “students engage in ‘discursive ecology’ by exploring the connections among discourse, people, and the environment with the intent to ‘produce writing’ that addresses those contextual connections (Dobrin and Weisser 116–17)” (Walker 70). Through a local case study, whether or not to expand Arizona’s Snowbowl ski resort, Walker helps students analyze the discourses of various stakeholders (Native American tribes who argue the land is sacred and the owners of the resort who recommend expansion) in order to see how people understand and discuss their relationship with place. For further reference on eco-

literacies in pedagogy, please see Derek Owen's *Composition and Sustainability: Teaching for a Threatened Generation* and several contributions in Dobrin and Weisser's edited collection, *Ecocomposition: Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches*.

Place-based literacies are essential to our composition curricula and community literacy work. Place-based literacies help us understand how place is central to literacy practices and our theories about those practices. Being attentive to place allows scholars, students, and community members to discuss how places matter and are essential identity. This attentiveness also reveals how places change over time. I believe Gruenewald's idea of eco-justice should be the aim of our pedagogical and community practice; as educators and community workers, we must "develop an ethic of social and ecological justice where issues of race, class, gender, language, politics, and economics must be worked out in terms of people's relationship to their total environments, human and non-human" (6). The revision of place is inevitable, but we are ever reminded that we can participate in this change through our advocacy for the conservation and transformation of places in order to better our social realities.

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Writing Our Way Out: Memoirs From Jail

Edited by David Coogan

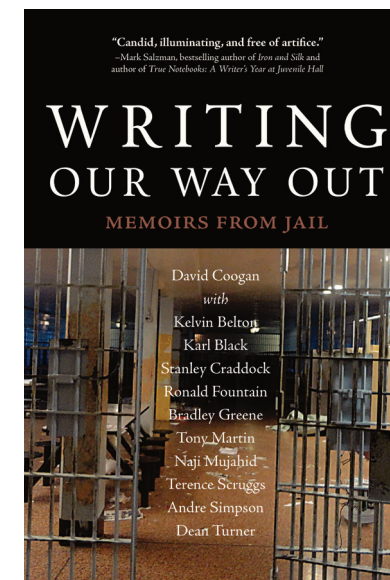
Richmond: BrandyLane P, 2016. 243 pp.

Reviewed by Maria Conti

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[Life is] about discovering the beauty that lies dormant inside of your fellow human beings. It's about giving love and then receiving it When you look at me, you won't see any of the above, at least not on the outside of who I appear to be. But x-ray me with your mind. Listen to my words. Look into my eyes. Here, let me help you. You'll need a light, because it's dark in my world You'll see the prison inside me (191).

—Stan, writing workshop participant



Prison writing program facilitators Wendy Wolters Hinshaw and Tobi Jacobi explain that while the public is inundated with fictional depictions of incarcerated people, we are not often able to hear from them directly ("What Words" 68). David Coogan's *Writing Our Way Out: Memoirs from Jail* offers readers this rare opportunity. As creative nonfiction, the majority of the book is comprised of the intimate reflections of ten incarcerated writers. The epigraph above is a microcosm of the raw, honest exploration of self that echoes throughout the piece. What makes the work even more insightful for both instructors in carceral settings and writing teachers is that Coogan includes his own memoir of teaching at the Richmond City Jail.¹ He begins each chapter with a first-person account of what he is thinking at different stages in the project. Rich in dialogue from the workshop and Coogan's inner monologue, these interludes provide context for the stories to come.

A scholar of rhetoric as social change whose work is familiar to many *CLJ* readers, Coogan makes a connection between this book and community-engaged research and praxis. Notably, he frames the project with Michael Warner's theory of the counterpublic, a term originally coined by Nancy Fraser. Counterpublics provide discursive space for people excluded from the dominant power structure of the