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From the Book Review Editor's Desk

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Book & New Media Reviews

From the Book Review Editor's Desk

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As my upper division rhetoric and English majors share the critical theory statements they've written as a preamble to each class, I'm keenly aware that our Literary Theory course has taken *Literacy Theory* as the main focus. When one student argues that, in order for something to be considered literary, it must somehow seek to transform the world and redress power imbalances, other students move into the strongly agree or disagree corners of the room for a spirited debate. If the measure of an artifact's literariness is that it makes a gesture toward the goal of social change, how big of a gesture must change-oriented projects make? As the debate unfolds, one question that emerges is whether or not a fast food kids' meal book about healthy eating might qualify as more *literary* than an established masterwork like *Finnegans Wake*. Some are more moved by the pragmatic potential of the children's book, while others argue that Joyce's innovative prose opens radical possibilities for breaking with established narrative conventions. Does the children's book do more to extend literacy than Joyce's masterpiece? Perhaps it does. Debate participants ultimately decide that both texts are valuable, though they are legitimated differently in different communities, which complicates often-dichotomized terms such as "vernacular culture" and "high culture." The suggestion here is that respect and productive interaction can occur across divergent sites and literacy practices.

The circulation of texts, agency, power, ideas, and resources is a thematic constant in the texts and reviews in this issue. William Carney's keywords essay on *critical service learning* sets the tone for the book reviews that follow, as he explores the inequalities and power imbalances at play in our most earnest and "unapologetic" attempts to enact social change as literacy educators. Carney suggests that students' written reflections on service-learning partnerships, even when those partnerships may strike us as failures, can meet the more modest goal of helping students to understand better literacy work as more than just the teaching of reading, writing, and workplace skills. The example Carney gives is a service-learning project wherein writing tutors, who were also full-time undergraduate students, grew to better understand the lives of the community

members they worked with even though the tutors couldn't ultimately offer the intensive English instruction the community members desired.

David Dadurka's review of *The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning* explores how service-learning partnerships can be better designed to address community members' needs and perspectives in sustainable ways. Dadurka's review calls attention to three essential principles of successful and reciprocal relationships: commitment, communication, and compatibility. He reasons that the principles may help to offset the tendency of members of educational institutions to position themselves as more privileged or knowledgeable than the community members with whom they work. As Dadurka emphasizes, "commitment may be the most fundamental" principle because it is essential to the maintenance of good communication and the "will to develop training and screening mechanisms to assure compatibility."

In Beth Savoy's review of *Circulating Communities: The Tactics and Strategies of Community Publishing*, it is apparent that the *community* aspect of the community publishing process is even more important than the products made. Savoy's review showcases the book's divergent array of community publishing projects. These projects share in common the aim of challenging "dominant, mainstream media" perspectives to position community members as valuable producers of knowledge. The importance of cultivating rhetorical tactics and strategies to resist dominant ideologies also comes to the fore in Jenna Vinson's dynamic review of Adela Licon's *Zines in Third Space: Radical Cooperation and Borderlands Rhetoric*. As Vinson suggests, zines (often collaborative, self-published magazines) provide cultural workers a space to situate rhetoric as a practice that's adaptable to specific communities and real-world exigencies.

In terms of pragmatic needs, when a student of mine pursuing a career as a high school teacher, expresses enthusiasm for *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and asks me where she could learn more about the complications of applying Freirean methods to the classroom, I am grateful to be able to recommend Katie Sylvester and Anne-Marie Hall's review of Lesley Bartlett's book *The Word and the World*. Sylvester and Hall use a dialogue format to discuss "the deeply ideological implications of the work we do as literacy educators." They frame their discussion around 1) Bartlett's view on the limitations of Freirean praxis; 2) the complicated emotions and destructive myths and assumptions that are ever-present in community literacy work; and 3) why Bartlett's ethnographic research is particularly relevant to community literacy specialists who seek global and comparative perspectives on literacy education.