

Fall 2014

Circulating Communities: The Tactics and Strategies of Community Publishing

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Recommended Citation

Savoy, Beth. "Circulating Communities: The Tactics and Strategies of Community Publishing." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2014, pp. 88–91, doi:10.25148/clj.9.1.009303.

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*Circulating Communities: The Tactics and Strategies of
Community Publishing* ed. by Paula Mathieu, Steve Parks,
Tiffany Rousculp (review)

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Community Literacy Journal, Volume 9, Issue 1, Autumn 2014, pp. 88-91
(Review)

Published by Community Literacy Journal
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/clj.2014.0019>



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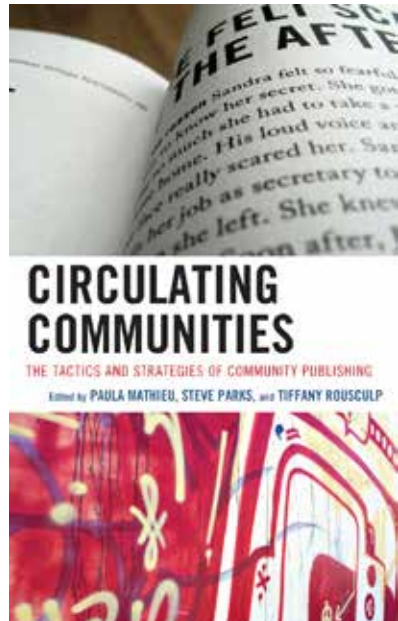
Paula Mathieu, Steve Parks, and Tiffany Rousculp, eds.
Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011. 230 pp.

Reviewed by Beth Savoy

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From the start, editors Paula Mathieu, Steve Parks, and Tiffany Rousculp acknowledge the difficulties in defining and representing all types of what they call “community publishing” and “community writers.” As they argue, rhetoric and composition has been a bit of a latecomer in noting the value of community publishing, as the field has much longer valued writing done for the purpose of attaining a college degree. Starting in the 1990s, though, scholarship began to consider “composition’s extracurriculum” (Gere) by looking at writing beyond the classroom, especially writing that calls for public change and how that writing circulates (Wells), sometimes written by academics who have chosen to “go public” (Mortensen) as “public intellectuals” (Cushman) or by students engaging in service learning (Herzberg). While Mathieu, Parks, and Rousculp acknowledge the importance of these steps, they ask for a shift in how we imagine our roles as writing teachers, particularly as we move from writing framed to be “about, with, and for” the community to community publishing being seen as “writing by the community.”

More than that, Mathieu, Parks, and Rousculp believe that higher educational community partnerships can continue to exist so long as there is a shift in how these partnerships are maintained, especially as they believe that there needs to be consistent dialogue between both parties and a transparent effort in representing community writers as “marginal writers” and not simply “native informants.” Therefore, *Circulating Communities: The Tactics and Strategies of Community Publishing* represents community writing as a type of participatory media that works to challenge dominant frameworks used by mainstream media to articulate the needs of poor or under-resourced populations. The text argues that “community writers” do this by challenging and/



or offering alternative outlets for expression in order to express their knowledge and worth to a larger audience, and in turn, encourage broader participation. The goal of the book is to represent scholarship about this type of “community writer” by investigating community publications created fully outside of the academy, exploring projects that work to inform composition and rhetoric classrooms by drawing from community-based publication projects, and asking us to consider how community publishing can take on an advocacy role as we link them to college students.

To summarize, the book is divided into three major sections. The first section includes four chapters that explore community publications that begin outside of the academy. Nick Pollard and Pat Smart are authors of the first chapter titled “Making Writing Accessible to All: The Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers and TheFED.” Pollard and Smart discuss the coming together of the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP) and TheFED from a writers’ workshop at the Centerprise bookshop in 1976 London. The chapter itself explores the history and diverse publications of the group and argues that throughout its history, the group’s central effort is the same—to make workers’ voices heard and on their own terms. Paula Mathieu’s chapter, “The Challenges of Circulation: International Networking of Homeless Publications,” focuses on the challenges that community publications face as they work to circulate ideas within and beyond their communities, particularly the diverse circulation situations among street paper publications. Mathieu posits that these types of publications have the potential to do important advocacy work through helping impoverished and homeless people to establish networks, but that there are important steps that still need to be taken first. In “Respect, Writing, Community: Write Around Portland,” Sara Guest with Hanna Neuschwander and Robyn Steely discusses the ways that Write Around Portland “serves ‘underserved’” populations in the Portland area by offering participants a voice in their eight-to-ten week workshops since 1999. The chapter gives an overview of the program, history, and publications, discussing in much depth the publication process for their Write Around anthologies. The last chapter in this section, “Listen to My Story: The Transformative Possibilities of Storytelling in Immigrant Communities” by Mark Lyons, talks about Open Borders Project/Proyecto Sin Fronteras in North Philadelphia. In particular, Lyons discusses how their digital story program has woven together storytelling, writing, and technology to create audio stories that provide immigrants with computer and language skills while also creating a community around their classes. He also discusses the lessons they have learned from their digital storytelling program and how they are using their stories to organize public debate over immigration issues in the United States. These four chapters work to show how various community projects challenge dominant, mainstream media to give voices to various underrepresented populations.

The second section of the collection includes three chapters that draw from the work of community-based publication projects to inform rhetoric and composition classrooms. In “Oral Histories as Community Outreach: Toward a Deeper Understanding of a Rural Public Sphere,” Laura Cella talks about her work at

Shippensburg University in Pennsylvania, particularly an oral history project written by first-year writing students for a community member of their choice. She discusses the goals that were met and unmet by publishing the oral history projects in a journal and what she and her students learned by working on the project. Rachel Meads in “Unfinished: A Story of *sine cera*, a Community Publications in Process” discusses the Salt Lake Community College (SLCC) Community Writing Center’s annual anthology of their DiverseCity Writing Series (DWS) called *sine cera*. In particular, she gives the history and purpose of the program and its anthologies, the changes and challenges it has faced, and its current challenges, including how they can continue to imagine how higher educational community partnerships can continue to be mutually beneficial. North Carolina’s Durham County Library is the location where Abels, Clemons, Wilson, Winters, and Woods describe the six-year history and evolution of a program that pairs teens with volunteer writing coaches from UNC-Chapel Hill and Duke writing centers to publish their work. Like other chapters, “Here in this Place: Write On! Of Durham, North Carolina” describes the rewarding work volunteers have found in helping enable marginalized students find their voice.

Finally, the third section of the collection includes four chapters that investigate how community publishing can take on an advocacy role as it is linked to college students. In “Sharing Space: Collaborative Programming Within and Between Communities,” Case, Knepler, and Soni from the Neighborhood Writing Alliance (NWA) in Chicago explore the history of their collaborations and partnerships. Case, Knepler, and Soni discuss the trials and errors they experienced with collaborating but place much emphasis on the overall importance and value of such collaborations. Richard Louth in “Katrina in Their Own Words: Collecting, Creating, and Publishing Writing on the Storm” writes about the radio program “Katrina: In Their Own Words,” as it enabled students impacted by Hurricane Katrina to broadcast their stories on the Southeastern Louisiana University’s radio station, KSLU. He considers the challenges and rewards of writing and teaching writing about the storm—for himself and his students. “Writers Speaking Out: The Challenges of Community Publishing from Spaces of Confinement” by Tobi Jacobi and Elliot Johnston reflects on the SpeakOut! Writing workshops for youth and adult writers confined to correctional and rehabilitation centers in Fort Collins, Colorado, and sponsored by the Community Literacy Center at Colorado State University. The chapter discusses the process of publication of the SpeakOut! journal as well as the unique challenges of circulation and reception the journal faces. Finally, the last chapter, “A Bunch of Us Beg to Differ!: Queer Community Literacy and Rhetorics to Civic Pride” by A.V. Luce, discusses how university, art, and community activists in Syracuse responded to anti-gay hate speech in 2009 with an online collaborative photo project published on Blogspot. Luce posits that understanding the “community” part of the “community publishing” process may be just as important as the product it captures. These four chapters in particular work to show that collaboration among many is key in realizing the advocacy role of community publishing.

On the one hand, the book’s biggest strength might be in its work to represent multiple types of community publishing projects working in mutually benefitting

partnerships with various underrepresented community writers. This diversity, as well as the decision to break the book into three different sections with three different goals, opens its potential usefulness to multiple readers inside and outside of the classroom, field of rhetoric and composition, university, and United States, as the book shows that these projects are often sponsored by collaborations between multiple people and organizations, including universities and communities. Additionally, these multiple readers could potentially gain various types of wisdom from the book: the histories and publication processes of many of these types of organizations lends pragmatic wisdom to readers, discussions of both achievements and shortcomings offer a sense of community that comes with such honesty, and the book is a step in connecting the various community publishing projects in the book to each other and other audiences. On the other hand, for a book that focuses on community publishing as a form of participatory media, it would be nice to see more examples of digital participatory media. While a couple of pieces focus on the use of technology to publish audio histories and stories, only Luce's piece really focuses on the power of the internet to connect us in the 21st century. The editors explain in the introduction their decision to focus most on the power of print media, particularly regarding the populations it reaches and the reverence it carries, but I wonder if a look at digital participatory media might aid in helping publishing reach a new level of that advocacy role the editors mention.