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Unsustainable: Re-Imagining Community Literacy, Public Writing, Service-Learning and the University

Jody A. Briones

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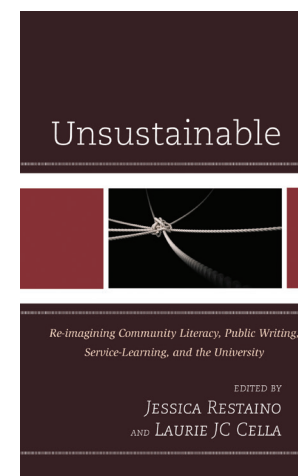
Restaino, Jessica and Laurie JC Cella, eds.
Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013. 275 pp.

Reviewed by Jody A. Briones

Texas A&M University-Kingsville

In *Unsustainable: Re-Imagining Community Literacy, Public Writing, Service-Learning and the University*, the collection's authors address community and university factors that contribute to unsustainable civic and service-learning projects. In light of the shortcomings outlined in these projects, the collection advocates for a more flexible way of defining and assessing sustainability, something Paula Mathieu calls for in *Tactics of Hope*, a community literacy text that is significantly referenced throughout *Unsustainable*. In *Tactics of Hope*, Mathieu states that all sustainable projects are unpredictable; therefore, service-learning leaders and practitioners must create alternative visions of projects as the needs and circumstances of these projects change, including nontraditional assessment methodologies. University-led civic and service-learning projects are traditionally assessed based on the sustainability of the project and the successful completion of university goals (17). *Tactics of Hope* encourages nontraditional assessment methodologies that focus on the collaborative processes and personal relationships formed between community and university, meaning projects can be "unsustainable" but still be successes because of the positive relationships formed. It is this concept of nontraditional assessment of sustainability that *Unsustainable* advocates for—finding successes in "unsustainable" civic and service-learning projects.

In Part I, "Short-Lived Projects, Long-Lived Value," contributing authors discuss factors that caused their respective university-based service-learning projects to prematurely end, and, in some cases, how projects continued, in altered form, when university sponsorship ended. The section begins with Mathieu's "After Tactics, What Comes Next?," which picks up where *Tactics of Hope* leaves off. In Chapter 1, Mathieu updates readers that the three-way community partnership of Boston College, Sandra's Lodge (a Boston-based homeless shelter), and *Spare Change News* (a Boston street newspaper written by the homeless and low-income) she discussed in *Tactics of Hope* was unsustainable after it lost significant funding and detached from the academic



course to which it was initially linked. Although the project was unsustainable, Mathieu does not view the project a failure. She ends the chapter by emphasizing the necessity of an evolutionary ideology and methodology of civic and service-learning projects: “projects can end, sometimes abruptly; they can (and perhaps should) become institutionalized as ongoing university-community partnerships; they can change into other projects or other configurations of partnership, or they might end and perhaps begin again” (17). The three remaining chapters in Part I each describe a civic or service-learning project that would become unsustainable due to institutional/community power differentials. The crux of the problem for faculty is “working with the system without becoming of the system” (36), as Paul Feigenbaum, Sharayna Douglas, and Maria Lovett explain in Chapter 2. The collapse of this dichotomy, in its various forms, hinders the sustainability of a project.

In Part II, “Community Literacy, Personal Contexts,” junior faculty discuss the dichotomous relationship of tenure and promotion assessment and the commitment to community engagement projects. Chapters 5 and 6 explore the contradictions of institutional mission statements of public service (intentions) and the low value public service projects are given in tenure and promotion assessment (actions). It is for this reason Donnelly recommends junior faculty not spearhead service-learning or civic engagement projects. Instead, Donnelly recommends junior faculty participate in an already existing project, letting senior faculty take the lead or waiting until after tenure and promotion to establish a service-learning or civic engagement project. However, not establishing or participating in sustainable projects is a lost opportunity for professional marketability. To deal with the lack of long-term sustainable projects, Karen Johnson, in Chapter 7, advocates for mobile sustainability, which is the consistency of a service, no matter the location or population. Like Deans and Donnelly, Johnson explains how her lack of power as an adjunct and the multiple institutional moves she made to accept better institutional offers limited her opportunities for long-term sustainable projects: “mobile sustainability for service initiatives was my only option as an adjunct because I lacked power to enact change and the institutional knowledge to effectively build an institutionalized program” (154-55). Invoking Mathieu’s ideology that sustainable projects are unpredictable as their needs evolve, Johnson emphasizes that mobile sustainability forces acculturation as project needs and methodologies are consistently being (re)assessed.

Part III, “Pedagogy,” suggests alternative theoretical frameworks for enacting and assessing service-learning projects. For example, in Chapter 9, Hannah Ashley invokes border theory by using Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of *mestiza* consciousness, an in-between, third space subject position, to describe the subject position of writing center mentors. More specifically, Ashley presents the idea of the writing center as a third space “birthing center,” where writing mentors occupy *mestiza* consciousness as students’ “literacy dulas” (179). As literacy dulas, writing “[m]entors work together with writers in the writers’ own interests, to find productive locations and to birth productive just-outsider discourses” (192), what Ashley refers to as mentor and mentee “exchanges in interstitial moments” (182). The importance of relationships is also the

focus of Chapter 8, which emphasizes the progressive relationship building within service-learning projects amongst academic institutions, participating communities, faculty, and students. In Chapter 8, Lorelei Blackburn and Ellen Cushman argue that relationship building amongst the entities that create the service-learning projects “needs to be woven throughout the entire process of developing [and delivering] teaching curricula...as well as in evaluation and assessment” of the project (163). Blackburn and Cushman state that the sustainability of a project depends on the relationship of the players: if the relationship between the players is good, then sustainability of the project is likely; if the relationship between the players is strained, then the project is more likely to be unsustainable. Therefore, Blackburn and Cushman argue that the material out-put the project creates and the relationships built during the project should both be considered the “products” of the project (171).

Part IV, “Calls for Transnational Sustainability,” investigates how diverse forms of rhetoric can be used to sustain communities, specifically diasporic ethnic groups within the U.S. In Chapter 10, Elenore Long discusses how Gambian-Americans and members of the Nipmuck tribe in Massachusetts use transgressive technai, in the form of rhetorical intervention and invention, to create “new paths, new outcomes” (205) for their respective communities, creating a transformative sustainability of culture. Similarly, Jennifer Clifton, in Chapter 11, reflects on the negative and positive transgressive effects rhetoric, as stochastic art, has had on Sudanese refugees in Phoenix. Although both Clifton and Long advocate for the sustainability of these communities, Clifton argues, “sustainability is neither a goal nor something to be celebrated except as either of these serve the rhetorical purposes of pursuing the health of the communities we engage with” (230). In other words, the needs of the community must always be of priority.

The conclusion by collection co-editor Jessica Restaino and the afterword by community-based learning scholar Eli Goldblatt are both calls-to-action for a revisioning of sustainability projects based on university/community partnerships. Restaino states, “The call...needs to be for a more radical refiguring of what university/community collaborations might look like and how they can be valued” (253). She also argues that universities need to place a higher value on civic and service-learning projects to encourage more academics to create or participate in these sustainable initiatives. Goldblatt, on the other hand, argues that to participate in a civic or service-learning project out of professional obligation or personal guilt “is ultimately selfish and its products unsustainable” (264) because of the lack of sincerity. Goldblatt encourages “to act out of compassion” (264), which, when coupled with allegiances and partnerships also acting out of compassion, makes positive change inevitable and sustainable.

Unsustainable asks the target audience of academicians to reevaluate how they define, enact, and assess civic and service-learning projects and sustainability. Placed in a larger discussion, this collection creates a dialogue with Ellen Cushman’s “Sustainable Service Learning Programs,” Christian Weisser’s *Moving beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere*, Eli Goldblatt’s *Because We Live Here:*

Sponsoring Literacy beyond the College Curriculum, and of course, Paula Mathieu's *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*, a text largely referenced throughout this collection. Unique to this collection, however, and its main strength, is the focus on “unsuccessful,” or unsustainable, civic and service-learning projects. Authors explain the “what went wrong” aspects of their unsustainable projects to (re) evaluate the definition, enactment, and assessment of sustainability with more fluidity and flexibility.

A misfire in this collection is the incorporation of Border Theory (*mesitza* consciousness—Chapter 9), Maternal Theory (literacy *dula*—Chapter 9), and Greek mythology (*techne/chronos/kairos*—Chapters 10 and 11). Although these are relevant and valued theories and discussions, these chapters feel disconnected from the rest of the collection because of their heavy reliance on theoretical abstractions instead of concrete examples, like most chapters in the collection. These chapters belong in a more theoretically-based collection.

Overall, *Unsustainable* is a must-read for all faculty and university administrators who engage in civic and service-learning projects. Although it does not provide specific solutions to troubled projects and their inevitable unsustainability, this collection is an invaluable resource on how to create or revise institutional civic and service-learning programs. Furthermore, *Unsustainable* should also be required reading in graduate programs that emphasize sustainability because it forces readers to question the definition of sustainability and how it should be enacted and assessed.

Cultural Practices of Literacy: Case Studies of Language, Literacy, Social Practice, and Power

Purcell-Gates, Victoria, ed.

Mahwah, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2007. Print. \$46.95

Reviewed by Kelly A. Concannon Mannise

Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, FL.

In *Cultural Practices of Literacy* Victoria Purcell-Gates argues that school-based literacy instruction does not necessarily transfer into the literacy practices in individuals' everyday lives. Drawing from a theoretical framework that reveals how literacy is a social practice, Purcell-Gates constructs an edited collection where contributors to this volume are part of the Cultural Practices of the Literacy Studies (CPLS) team. The collection disrupts an assumed correlation between direct English-based literacy instruction in schools and the literacies practiced by members of traditionally marginalized groups in everyday contexts. Contributors to this collection employ ethnographic methodologies to provide a careful and detailed account of participants' uses of literacy within and outside of the classroom. They present complex accounts of individuals' literacy practices, indicating how power is always embedded in the use of reading, writing, and speaking, as many scholars invested in “non-traditional” literacies have long explored (See Albright, Ball; Cushman; Barton and Hamilton; Brandt; Brodkey; Gee).

The first chapter affords readers with the theoretical and methodological basis for the Cultural Practices of Literacy Studies (CPLS) study. In “Complicating the Complex,” Purcell-Gates discusses how each chapter follows a standard protocol that explicitly reveals contributors' locations and relationships to participants. This move serves as a general introduction to each chapter, which is followed by a description of the historical and/or cultural contexts where literacy practices emerge. The framework informs all studies in the collection; Purcell-Gates intends to encourage readers to identify patterns across studies and make more generalized claims about the relationships amongst schooling, literacy, and literacy development. To that end, Purcell-Gates gathers information about the material conditions through which individuals participate in literacy events—emphasizing the extent to which literacy is a social practice—while presenting substantial evidence for an understanding of how hegemony, power, and domination affect the uses and representations of literacies (15-17).

