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Love and Poetic Anarchy: Establishing Mutual Care in Community Writing

Emily Marie Passos Duffy and Ellie Swensson

Abstract

This profile details the ethos and emergent growth of Writers Warehouse, a collective project founded in 2016 with a focus on creation, craft, collaboration, and community. Based in Colorado, Writers Warehouse now aims to position itself as a mutual care collective through curating inclusive, non-hierarchical spaces, developing open access resources, and establishing a microgrant program for local writers.

Keywords

mutual care, mutual aid, poetry, community writing, poetic anarchy

Introduction

The Writers Warehouse (WW) project began in July 2016 at the Boulder Creative Collective (BCC) as “Boulder Writers Warehouse,” a culmination of three years of community conversations about establishing a local hub for writers. The warehouse was originally designed to meet three specific needs voiced by writers in the region—reading venues, workshop rooms and supplies, and studio space. After two years of this model, it became clear that there was something missing. Our workshops were well attended, our event calendar was consistently full, and our studio space fostered plenty of creation, yet we could not find a stable source of financial support that allowed us to keep the space open. Monthly memberships never broke \$200/month, not nearly enough to cover our \$850/month rent. We went through multiple grant hearings where we received high scores and complimentary notes, yet we did not receive any funding in these proceedings. It was evident that the models we were operating on and the systems we were advised to work within were not working for us. We had to adapt. And to adapt, we needed time; time which we quite literally could not afford. In 2018, we left our studio at BCC, and we took a year to listen harder, find out what went wrong, what went right, and, perhaps more importantly, what we had left unexplored and unimagined.

This pause was crucial to WW’s development. By stepping out of funding hearings and larger projects for a year, we were able to witness our community and our work from a space of contemplation rather than reactivity. It became clear to us in this process that doing *the work* doesn’t always look like “work” as it is defined in our American capitalistic frameworks. WW shifted our focus to see what our community

was looking for, experiment with approaches to meet those needs, and also fundamentally question what—and who—was left out of conversations about the writing “community” in general. Our first logistical step was to stop limiting ourselves geographically to Boulder. We started brainstorming multiple infrastructure projects to further accessibility in the writing community. How could we be mobile and adaptable, offer open-access, egalitarian resources, and support place-based community writing projects and installations? By late 2019, we realized that our true goal was to establish a mutual care collective for writers, and we returned to our original physical studio as part of the BCC’s inaugural sponsored artists-in-residence program¹ with this aim in mind.

This profile shares our experiences and the theory and poetry that inform our practice and our work to foster mutual aid in the writing community. Our aim is to illustrate how combining a revolution of intimacy with an adaptive strategy fosters powerful community collaborations. This paper is our perspective on how empathy, advocacy, ego moderation, and poetic anarchy are fundamental, revolutionary tools in supporting community connection in the literary world. Our hope is that these perspectives may be useful to those who are new to community writing projects and also may invite established practitioners to renegotiate their own relationships with academic and nonprofit institutions to imagine more liberatory possibilities and approaches.

In order to understand our goals, it is important to recognize WW’s positionality within active systems of privilege and systems of oppression. Our geographic location inextricably links WW to Denver and Boulder’s literary scene which is known for its connection to the Beats, a literary movement in the 1950s that celebrated ideals of social and literary experimentation while in practice perpetuating sexism, racism, and ego worship.² Unfortunately, this pattern of harmful contradictions between ideals and practice very much persists in the Front Range today.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimated Boulder’s population in 2019 at 90.2% white and Denver County as a whole at 80.8% white. In such a demographic context, any “business as usual” approach to the arts inherently centers whiteness rather than engaging the necessary work of resource reallocation and anti-racism. In terms of literary representation, Colorado named Bobby LeFebre as the Poet Laureate in July 2019, and LeFebre is the first person of color to receive the title since its inception in 1919. For 100 years, the highest honor available to poets in the state was held exclusively by white writers. Without explicitly naming white privilege and willingly surrendering this privilege, Boulder and Denver’s government funds, art commissions, and art nonprofits are incapable of nurturing meaningful representation and support for communities of color.

So where do we as co-directors of WW fall in this cultural context? We both have Masters of Fine Art degrees, allowing us access to local and national academic resources and networks that many are excluded from. As a white, femme, queer, cisgender woman, Ellie has a strong privilege of passing that allows her unquestioned access to many institutional spaces that are historically unwelcoming and/or inaccessible to marginalized and disenfranchised communities. As a white-passing Latinx cis-wom-

an and a sex worker in a legal faction of the industry, Emily shares connections with grassroots organizing communities and is also employed within higher education. We both carry certain amounts of privilege³ while simultaneously being a part of marginalized communities, and we believe our ability to pass through social sieves invites us to be strategic disruptors and voices of dissent. Adrienne maree brown writes “Where we are born into privilege, we are charged with dismantling any myth of supremacy. Where we were born into struggle, we are charged with claiming our dignity, joy, and liberation” (brown, “Report: Recommendations”). Our individual complexities within our own positionalities, and the attendant work we are tasked with, directly informs our approach to community writing.

Our theoretical foundation for WW’s engagement with the writing community consists of poetry by women of color, black feminist theory, and case studies of mutual care. This particular combination is a demonstration of our belief that theory and praxis are intertwined. Two theorists that form the bedrock of our community literacy and intentions in this work are bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldúa. In particular, we turn to the liberatory thread between hooks’s writing on feminism and Anzaldúa’s ideas on dual consciousness/hybrid identity. Both thinkers move the reader away from divisive silos and identity politics towards a more holistic framework for liberation. Their works are situated in different cultural contexts and embodied experiences, but they are speaking to everyone. All advocate for solidarity and coalition-building—inviting those with different identities into the shared struggle. Hooks’s style of scholarship is inherently disruptive, both in form and content. Anzaldúa uses poetry and theorizing to weave a fabric of text that is porous, nondual, and liberating. We draw from their work, not to reinforce a certain canonical understanding of these writers, but rather to articulate their presence in our own literacies and politics.

Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two moral combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes” (78-79). Anzaldúa’s positioning of this both/and approach as a path towards true liberation—and not a lock—is situated within the framework of *la mestiza* identity and brings with it the respective cultural consciousness that Anzaldúa carries. This perspective on liberation can also be applied within the context of community writing projects and relationship building because it encourages us to see through a nondual lens of complexity. We need to embrace complexity and contradiction and reject rigidity in order to move towards a liberatory praxis of community writing.

Feminist theory and practice, as articulated by hooks in *Feminism is for Everybody*, corresponds with our vision for community writing and inviting folks to self-identify as writers. Hooks advocates for a “mass-based” visionary feminist movement, one that is not ignorant to identity-based differences but situated within them and connected to a broader movement towards total liberation: “Radical visionary feminism encourages all of us to courageously examine our lives from the standpoint of gender, race, and class so that we can accurately understand our position within the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (116). This invitation to the

table is a call to examine one's own complacency and role in, to recall brown, dismantling supremacy and/or reclaiming dignity and joy, and it is a critical part of that practice.

Hooks understands that there are different paths to literacy. She also argues for solidarity and coalition-building—inviting those with different identities into the shared struggle. She emphasizes the importance of cultivating a politics and literacy that is far-reaching and unbound by the institution of the university:

Mass-based feminist education for critical consciousness is needed. Unfortunately class elitism has shaped the direction of feminist thought. Most feminist thinkers/theorists do their work in the elite setting of the university. For the most part we do not write children's books, teach in grade schools, or sustain a powerful lobby which has a constructive impact on what is taught in the public school. I began to write books for children precisely because I wanted to be a part of a feminist movement making feminist thought available to everyone. Books on tape help extend the message to individuals of all ages who do not read or write. (113)

Embracing complexity and valuing accessibility of resources outside of institutional bounds, whether that means financial resources or sharing information, resists gate-keeping and moves towards a culture of community care.

This is where our theoretical boots meet practical ground in our engagement with mutual care. The practice of mutual care is a foundation of resistance movements spanning multiple generations, continents, and cultural contexts. At its core, mutual care is co-created by communities to heal the experienced socio-economic damage of industrial complexes. Two successful and currently active examples of mutual care are The Icarus Project, which supports the mental health community, and Lysistrata, which supports marginalized sex workers. The Icarus Project focuses on collective healing and liberation through offering peer support spaces, rapid response webinars, training, publications, and workshops. Their model focuses on combating the medical industrial complex through resource sharing to increase access to services and education (“What We Do.”). Lysistrata Mutual Care Collective and Fund supports marginalized sex workers, individuals who are criminalized by the justice system and stigmatized by the nonprofit industrial complex, by distributing emergency funds to workers in crisis to help meet immediate survival needs. Both Lysistrata and The Icarus Project operate outside of traditional, institutional bounds, and therefore can move in ways that are adaptable and responsive to community needs. The type of care they offer their communities is a kind of radical intimacy that values people, their agency, and their wellbeing above all else.

Revolution of Intimacy

The revolution of intimacy in our work is bounded empathy and advocacy in practice; it is an ethos of mutual care and inclusivity. In *Pleasure Activism: The Politics Of Feeling Good*, adrienne maree brown posits a crucial alternative to the scarcity mentality used by various institutions to limit and destroy us. She writes, “Liberated rela-

tionships are one of the ways we actually create abundant justice, the understanding that there is enough attention, care, resource, and connection for all of us to access belonging, to be in our dignity, and to be safe in community” (407). Brown’s ideas are intricately connected with mutual care as well as our view that erotic empowerment is a critical component of presence and embodiment in the work. As Audre Lorde states, “the erotic is not a question only of what we do. It is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing” (2). Lorde positions the erotic as “a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self, and the chaos of our strongest feelings” (2).⁴ Both Lorde’s articulation of the erotic and brown’s emphasis on liberated relationships demonstrate how intimacy, creative expression, and embodied joy and sensation can serve as radical reclamations of autonomy.

This freedom and promise of “abundant justice” connects the personal with the political. Radical self care ripples outwards; it becomes radical community care. And, when a community is radically caring for itself, there is little room for the active violence of gentrification, poverty, etc. Outside the bounds of institutions and organizations, “Mutual aid is real work. Caring for others is real work. Distributing free resources & building resource networks is real work. Creating and sharing content for liberatory pedagogy is real work” (The Comrade Closet). At the time of writing this, COVID-19 has made its way to our community, and we are seeing the urgency of multiple and emergent mutual aid endeavors intending to support community members in meeting basic needs, maintaining connection to creative communities, and staving off the loneliness and feelings of isolation that CDC-recommended social distancing may produce. These emergent mutual aid strategies, on large and small scales, within artistic communities, are revolutions of intimacy.

Part of intimacy and work that emphasizes relationships is a recognition of writers as fully human, fallible, and situated within their cultural moment. Writers, then, must remain self-aware and name the positionality of their identities in order to prevent a false and oppressive sense of authority. In her poem, “Revolutionary Letter #11,” Dianne DiPrima pleads for such authenticity: “we got to/ come out from behind the image” (21). We often forget, as Ostriker reminds us, that “[t]he poet is not simply a phantom manipulator of words but a confused actual person” (320). It may seem obvious, but explicitly recognizing writers as flawed human beings is a radical act toward liberation.⁵ When we do so, we highlight our moral obligation to interrogate the literary canon and hold it accountable for its harms. Similarly, we have an obligation to hold new and emerging writers to the same standards.⁶ For example, as hosts of community events we do not have to hold space for a bigoted poet at an open mic for the sake of creative expression. Voices invested in perpetuating systemic violence against oppressed people are not valid in community space. If “compromise is a coffin nail,” (26) as Audre Lorde aptly states, then radical accountability of self and of one’s peers is a life-affirming act.

A necessary part of intimacy is self-care and survival, which requires knowing and naming what we are fundamentally against. This delineation is a charged topic in conversations on community building about the effectiveness of “cancel culture” and the distinctions between “calling in” and “calling out.” We affectionately refer to

this kind of boundary setting as strategically burning bridges. Creative communities so often operate from a place of scarcity that we tend to collaborate with organizations or individuals that aren't aligned with our goals—or even, on a more fundamental level, our survival—in favor of sponsorship, fiscal support, promotion, and overall clout. Saying no is a crucial part of a revolution of intimacy in that it allows for healthy and sustainable partnerships where creativity can truly thrive.

This work of dissent and accountability is not something that can be done in isolation. WW, therefore, views writing in all its embodiments as inherently communal. None of us lives in a vacuum. We are inextricably, unquestionably linked, and our efforts to use language intentionally connects us to both our present community and the many overlapping literary lineages of the past. As Kimberly Blaeser writes in “The Voices We Carry”:

[...] no voice arises from one person. I know I write out of a place, a center, that is greater than what I alone am or could be [...] What I speak and write comes to me dank and tangled among the years and lives I carry. I write not only out of a knowledge of the past, but within a chamber of voices from the past. (269)

Acknowledging a tangled, polyvocal lineage of poets, theory, and practice in this way is central to our mission as a project and collective.

As believers in the inherently communal nature of writing practice, we see collaboration and partnership as fundamental. The term *partnered projects*—instead of community partnerships—reflects our experience that singular projects unbound by expectations of longevity or profitability allow for clear, honest, and sustainable communication. These partnered projects also make it far easier to set boundaries that foster genuine reciprocity and accountability in collaboration. WW has engaged in partnered projects with Boulder Housing Partners, City of Boulder Office of Arts and Culture, Jaipur Literature Festival, Boulder Public Library, CU Art Museum, Boulder Creative Collective, Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, Boulder Fringe Festival, Punch Drunk Press, Kleft Jaw Press, Writers for Migrant Justice, and multiple traditional and non-traditional venues for performances, workshops, and gatherings.

One example of a partnered project that exemplified the revolution of intimacy is Krewhouse, a reading series created with local press Kleft Jaw. The series focused on sharing writing in a non-hierarchical environment and offered a public reading space where “the table is always big enough and the doors stay open.” Each show featured local writers as well as artists from around the country. We used “introduction anarchy” to disrupt the genre of the literary bio and introduction. One example of this introduction anarchy was asking every poet to submit a poetic line prior to the reading. During the reading, each reader would say the name of the next poet and draw one of the poetic lines at random to introduce the next reader. This practice created a more cohesive group atmosphere and affirmed that no matter how credentialed each reader was, every poet had a platform to share their work in this non-hierarchical space.

Another aspect of care present in this reading series was that the community as a whole housed readers from out of town and offered transportation to and from the

reading and to house parties afterwards. Through this event we held the tenet that poets are people, and that “Justice is what love looks like in public, just like tenderness is what love feels like in private” (West). Krewhouse offered an experience of both the justice—the public event through the content of the readings and the diverse backgrounds of readers themselves—and the tenderness—through the personal connections, private conversations, family reunion-ness of it all—of love.

If the point of the writing is the people, the first step to viable resistance and change is palpable support in practical ways that values an individual’s survival and well-being first and foremost. How are you going to find the strength to write that poem, to show up for the workshop, to patron the reading, to contact that publisher, or to initiate that collaboration, if you don’t have the support of your community in ways that actually empower you? We acknowledge that as writers we are implicated in both the perpetuation and dismantling of oppressive systems. Language shapes our world, and language is the vehicle through which we express, communicate, build, and also challenge and deconstruct. As writers, we have to choose how we want to use our positionalities in our creative and community work. We have to ask ourselves day in and day out: Do we want to perpetuate the status quo or imagine a new future? Do we want to be stagnant or agile? And we need to recognize that the asking, the reflecting, and the actions we take are all equal parts of the work.

Adaptive Strategy

We define adaptive strategy as logistical agility which centers the immediate needs of the community over organizational recognition or ego. Our story is full of examples of this approach to community work, in our overall organizational structure as well as specific projects. In September of 2019, WW co-organized the Denver iteration of Writers for Migrant Justice, a national movement spearheaded by four writers of color that utilized readings as community fundraisers for Immigrant Families Together. This event took place against a backdrop of increased white supremacist activity in the Denver area, and we were vigilant about potential violence or harassment. After our second reader finished their set, we were asked to vacate the premises upon which we’d previously had permission to host the event (see Fig. 1). As organizers, we had to decide how to proceed with safety and accessibility in mind. We moved the remainder of the event to a different location and still managed to raise \$200. This was a testament to how adaptive strategy can function in the moment, and it was a powerful reminder of the collective power of the creative community on both local and national scales (see Fig. 2).

Since our inception, WW has viewed events like poetry reading series and workshops as opportunities to decentralize ego and redistribute intellectual and cultural capital. We plan to take that a few steps further with a fundraising campaign titled “Talk About Our Sh*t 2020.” This campaign will raise money for a writers’ microgrant program geared toward funding individual writers’ needs for anything from food and rent to workshop fees or publication supplies. Our criteria for distributing funds is inspired by *collective aporia*, an online artist collective and international festival. Their

website states: “Please note that we will never accept any applicants whose content promotes harmful, hateful, oppressive, or prejudice rhetoric, especially towards marginalized and vulnerable communities” (“Volunteer”). This statement is an example of the aforementioned strategically burned bridges we aim to uphold in our emerging projects.

In addition to the microgrant program, we intend to offer WW as a publication imprint for self-publishing writers. Many literary awards stipulate that eligible works must be published by a press. Our idea is to offer our name and imprint, no strings attached, so that self-published writers can enter the gated conversation of book awards and better distribution opportunities. Again, following the example of *collective aporia*, our stipulations will be that in order to receive this creative commons copyright, we will read the work and ensure it isn’t harmful and/or perpetuating messages that are racist, homophobic, sexist, classist, ableist, transphobic, etc. If submitted work does perpetuate such ideologies and cannot carry the WW imprint, the writer will be notified with a clear explanation of our concern and why we can’t endorse their piece.

Another concrete way in which we wish to mitigate gatekeeping in the poetry community is to create a “Lit Event Listserv”—an accessible email and cell phone listserv for people who want to stay informed of literary community events and wish to divest from social media. Social media platforms can be democratizing, but they also contribute to commodification of identity, invasions of privacy, and censorship. This Listserv will be an open access resource available to everyone regardless of institutional or social affiliation. We believe this kind of communication can be a tool for empowerment and liberation by increasing access and opportunity.

Mutual Care and Call to Action

By offering mutual care through a microgrant program, a publication imprint, and an open source Listserv, Writers Warehouse aims to disrupt hierarchies and foment poetic anarchy through radical accountability, revolutions of intimacy, and adaptive strategy. We have offered some of our reflections, strategies, and language in the hope that others engaged in community literacy work may be inspired to consider how mutual care and liberatory strategies apply to their particular contexts and communities of practice. Our advice for folks wanting to start their own community writing projects is to look around and see what’s already going on. Is there a program that’s under-resourced? A reading series that doesn’t get a lot of attention? Instead of being concerned with being first/best/etc., figure out how to be in a mutualistic relationship with what’s already happening. How can you show up and support? In particular, how can you leverage existing privileges and institutional access to address inequities and continue building and strengthening relationships within your literary communities? How might you continually emphasize the importance of pause, rest, and taking stock of what your project is actually up to as opposed to being beholden to institutional timelines/grant cycles—and in turn, gradually create more freedom for yourself and your organization? How can you invite more people into the practice and craft of writing? There are no easy answers here, but the more frequently we are willing to

ask complex questions and be continually accountable and receptive to the causes and community we care about, the more possibilities will open for deeper relationships, transformative projects, and community care.


Appendix




This past Tuesday we collaborated with @nataliexearnhart to host a reading as a part of the national #writersformigrantjustice fundraiser. Thank you to @short_sharp_shock @chrisdrosales @duffylala and @michaelagisela for performing and contributing your voice. Thank you to our audience who supported us through a mid-event venue change and who helped us raise over \$200 to date. To be displaced by a landlord of an empty lot in the midst of an event about displacement and deportation was a powerful experience and we appreciate everyone there who helped us with the transition. 🙌 photo by @emilyyatesmusic



Fig. 1 Image from Writers for Migrant Justice Denver Reading from: Writers Warehouse (@writers.warehouse).

 **Bolder Writers Warehouse**
@bolderwriterswarehouse

The next time someone tells you writers are just loners, writers are just egotistical, writers don't change the frickin world, remember this. Remember when a group of writers of color stood up and rallied a national community and collectively raised over \$35K (and counting) to make a difference in people's lives and take a stand against injustice. When someone tells you writing ain't a team sport, remind them scarcity mentality is a self fulfilling prophecy, rebellion runs deep in our bardic tradition, and this world ain't ready for how much power the voice and the pen wield on the daily. #writersformigrantjustice #poeticresistance #writingcommunity



Response Fund
FOR IMMIGRANTS

Postage Medical Food Emergency Transportation

Writers for Migrant Justice

\$35,329 raised of \$25,000 goal

513 donors **1.3K** shares **513** followers

Fig. 2 Screenshot of national Writers for Migrant Justice fundraising progress from:



Fig. 3 Poetry cookies made by community member, Jona Fine, for Jaipur Literature Festival, supported by funding from the city and Boulder Public Library. This is an example of using resources to connect existing dot sin the community and empower writers. WW saw JLF's need for an interactive activity, a local poet needing financial support who had a passion for baking, and using our connections to make something happen in which the poet received full funding for their materials and their time.

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Notes

1. As the only resident writers at BCC, we work to bridge the gap between writers and visual artists by nurturing new ideas and collaborations that push the boundaries of artistic disciplines. We understand deeply that all arts communities share the struggle for space and resources. WW believes that more collaboration across mediums and disciplines on individual and organizational bases not only creates engaging art but also increases our ability for surviving/thriving.

2. There are multiple essays and stories about the inherent sexism of the Beats movement and also how their elevation of the white male ego often led to sexual assault (see the lack of women’s voices and POC voices in Beat writings, Allen Ginsberg’s association with NAMBLA, etc).

3. Neither of us depend on this work for our financial livelihood, and this financial distancing allows us to refuse projects if they are not in line with our values. It also empowers us to be very intentional in avoiding any kind of long-term funding that would require us to answer to anyone other than the community we serve.

4. This acute and full feeling in the doing is inherently anticapitalist. Capitalism asks bodies to operate automatically—performing labor.

5. Idolizing well known poets and theorists perpetuates a culture of exceptionalism and discourages community members who may want to identify as writers and participate in writing communities.

6. If our goal is liberation, regression by way of apathy is not an option. Apathy is not what opens the door to creativity . . . it isn’t a LACK of action that empowers people to speak (unless they are the privileged folks). Creativity for all requires an intentional unlocking of the gate.

Author Bios

Ellie Swenson is a queer southerner currently writing poems in Denver, CO. She earned her MFA from Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa University in 2015. She is the founder and co-director of Writers Warehouse, a mutual

care collective for the writers' community. She has over 6 years of program experience including the reading series *Bouldering Poets* and *Krewhouse*, collaborations with the City of Boulder's Office and Art + Culture, Boulder Public Library, Denver's Small Press Fest, Jaipur Literature Festival, Boulder Creative Collective, and more. Swenson is a firm believer that poetics is what occurs where eros, divinity, activism, and careful craft intersect. Her poems are published in a handful of places you may know, but she prefers her words alive in the mouth and the body. Her debut collection of poems, *salt of us*, was published in 2019.

Emily Marie Passos Duffy is a Colorado-based poet, teacher, and performing artist. Her written work has been published in *Boulder Weekly*, *Portland Review*, *Cigar City Poetry Journal*, *Spit Poet Zine*, and *Iron Horse Literary Review*. She is a contributing member of *The Daily Camera's* Community Editorial Board and a 2020 artist-in-residence at Boulder Creative Collective. A 2020 finalist for the Noemi Press Book Award and a finalist of the 2020 Inverted Syntax Sublingua Prize for Poetry, she was also named a 2020 Disquiet International Luso-American Fellow. She earned her MFA in Creative Writing and Poetics from Naropa University in 2018. Her ongoing community collaborations include work with Writers Warehouse, Boulder Burlesque, and Tart Parlor.