

Spring 2022

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Recommended Citation

Moon, Sarah (2022) "Write Your Roots Disrupted: Community Writing in Performance in the Time of COVID," *Community Literacy Journal*: Vol. 16: Iss. 2, Article 36.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy/vol16/iss2/36>

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Write Your Roots Disrupted: Community Writing in Performance in the Time of COVID

Sarah Moon

Abstract

This article presents a profile of the community writing and performance project Write Your Roots, organized by the author, which was disrupted by the impact of COVID-19 in early 2020. The project narrative is framed by the theoretical basis for the project, rooted in the concept of “making space,” which borrows from Michel de Certeau’s concepts of space and Sidney Dobrin’s definition of “occupation.” The article then offers a narrative of the Write Your Roots project in Providence, RI in 2020 leading up to and beyond the effects of COVID-19. Following the narrative, the author reflects on the project, reading its disruption through its theoretical framework to draw conclusions about the importance of liveness and publicness toward the project goals of “making space.”

Keywords

performance, COVID-19, ecocomposition, public

The Write Your Roots project invites community members to volunteer to write and perform a monologue about a facet of their relationship with food that they feel inspired to share. The project’s concrete goals are to build community among people who share a love of food and to spread awareness about progressive food efforts in the local area where the project occurs. At an in person kick-off meeting, writers share ideas and meet trained writing coaches with whom they’ll be working to develop their monologues. After this meeting, writers can opt to meet in person or virtually with their writing coach weekly for four weeks to receive feedback on their developing monologues. With monologue drafts in hand, writers begin rehearsing their pieces as theatrical performances. The project culminates in a live performance of the monologues followed by a talkback where community food leaders join the performers on stage and a broader conversation about food in the community can take place.

The first Write Your Roots began in the fall of 2016 and became the focal point of my dissertation. CLiCK, a nonprofit organization in Willimantic, Connecticut that provides commercially licensed kitchen space to small scale food producers, served as our organizational partner, providing community contacts, promotion for the event, and rehearsal and performance space. We also partnered with GROW Windham, a local nonprofit whose mission is to build a stronger community and local food system, for the talkback after the performance. One participant wrote about eating free and inexpensive foods like passionfruit, eggs, rice and beans growing up in Puerto

Rico. Another wrote about “eating [his] way around town” as a child in Coaldale, Pennsylvania, and another about teaching nutrition in the public schools. And the youngest participant, a high school junior, wrote about serving meals to Willimantic’s homeless population. The project successfully attracted diverse audiences from the community, producing lively talkback sessions and instigating subsequent community collaborations; I knew that I would want to carry it out again.

In 2019, I moved to another former mill town, Pawtucket, Rhode Island, to be closer to my new job. I didn’t know anybody in this new place, but I was eager to test Write Your Roots’ transferability in Pawtucket. I wondered though about Eli Goldblatt’s emphasis in *Because We Live Here* on relationship building as a precursor to community writing work. Did I need to build relationships in this new place before I could launch a community writing project?

Though I recognized the sensitivity of entering into a new community as an outsider and guiding a project that would in some way reflect the community, I knew that given the nature of Write Your Roots, it would be the participating residents who would craft the messages of our performance. Other than the focusing theme of one’s personal relationship with food, there were no bounds on the types of stories that could be written. I felt empowered to launch the project also in part because of what LeCluyse, Onwuzuruoha, and Wilde write in “Write Here, Right Now: Shifting a Community Writing Center from a Place to a Practice,” that Write Your Roots, like their project, “maintains its identity not by where it operates but by what it does and who does it” (114). In the case of Write Your Roots, the *what* was a standard sequence of literate and performance rehearsal practices and the *who* a diverse array of volunteer community members who share a common interest around food. In this new place, I could test the validity of this aspiration on a second run of the project with the constant of myself as project facilitator.

Space, Place and Stage

As a community writing and performance project, Write Your Roots opens space for people to think about food from the perspective of *we the eaters*. Write Your Roots can claim the 2011 activist uprising Occupy Wall Street as an ideological progenitor. Like the organizers of Occupy, I was interested in a project that formed resistance to the societal domination of corporate forces and monocultures, particularly in defining the places where we live and eat. This project was born, in part, out of my desire to *make space in place* against the chilling effect of forces that have foreclosed the opportunity for what I call *ground-motion*, the activity of individuals and groups of people in the places where they live. The ultimate goal of the kind of space-making I hope Write Your Roots can achieve is the production of locality, a sense of place that is constructed and maintained by the creative—in the broadest possible scope of that word—activity of the people who live there.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau identifies cooking as one of the activities that affords opportunities to consumers who have been rendered “immigrants in a system too vast to be their own” (xx) to adapt “the dominant cultural

economy...to their own interests and their own rules” (xiv). To put de Certeau’s insights into perspective, ways of thinking about food are dominated by media messages received through television, radio and the internet, fad diets, social media trends and place-dominating corporate presences like fast food dining franchises and grocery stores chains. Yet, we all have personal food histories that help define us; we all experience an ongoing struggle to balance our income, our cooking skills, our food access, our health and our hunger. In short, food can be an extremely place-rooting—eating locally—and place-creating—cooking locally—force. Thus, I see the food-themed public storytelling of Write Your Roots as a way of wresting space from corporate forces and monocultures both tangible and residual.

Live performance on stage is a key component of Write Your Roots because it makes the project public and, thus, part of the many things that happen in and help define a place. A stage is never a definite place, but always a space waiting to be defined through performance, design and the audience’s imagination. Stages defy the imposition of societal norms and monocultural or corporate forces to insert fresh creative activity into a community’s collective perception of its home place. In studying the potential of embodied performance to directly impact communities, I was inspired by concepts of place and space in the work of Sidney Dobrin and Michel De Certeau. Both authors emphasize the *writability* of space as opposed to place. Space, Dobrin writes in “Occupying Composition,” can be thought of as free and open to movement, while place is stable, fixed, and defined. “Space,” Dobrin writes, “is yet to be written. It is potential; it is imagination” (17). Space, by this definition, is open to anyone who is present at a given time to fill and define.

On the stage, the fixed perceptions of a given place cannot foreclose the possibilities of what may happen there. Similarly, many towns and smaller communities across the country suffer under negative labels of “dangerous,” having “poor schools,” or being “dead,” leaving some residents to limit their conception of what is possible there, thereby opening the door for corporate forces to step into the vacuum. These are the types of places where a project like Write Your Roots may most meaningfully contribute to local revitalization. For example, the first community context for Write Your Roots, Willimantic, CT, a former mill town near to UConn where I was a graduate student, had long been negatively branded with the moniker of “Heroin Town” given to it by a *60 Minutes* TV news segment in 2003. In a 2019 news story about a proposal to demolish two vacant former hotels in Willimantic, state representative Susan Johnson commented on the *60 Minutes* piece, “We had a place here for people with addictions. We had been dealing with addictive problems for years and years and years...the [“Heroin Town” coverage] did nothing but help ruin the town” (Bassler).

The heavy baggage of that negative identity could be shed for the community-built Write Your Roots performance. For this rewriting of collective perceptions of place, Dobrin provides inspiration, “Space is yet to be written because space has not (yet) been given meaning; it awaits occupation. Space itself does not then occupy a different location than place, but the same locations, only as locations yet to be written, yet to be produced” (17-18). Adapting this idea to my intentions for Write Your Roots, I embraced the potential it suggests for making existing community locations,

whether saddled with negative reputations or overtaken by corporate dominance, into *spaces* and encouraging community members' creativity to define them anew. Write Your Roots, just like street theater or a movement like Occupy Wall Street, is an effort to write and produce space collaboratively by *the people* in ways that contribute to a longer term, locally-driven revitalization of place.

Project in Motion

While the *ground-motion* I imagined facilitating through Write Your Roots involved community members, the initial motion of the project rested solely on me beginning to form community contacts. Bringing Write Your Roots to Pawtucket/Providence began with a process of developing relationships with local organizations. My first move was to contact Farm Fresh Rhode Island (FFRI), a statewide nonprofit that runs several farmers' markets in Rhode Island, about sponsoring the project. They agreed to help publicize the project and bring representatives to the performance talkback. This gave me enough of a sense of support to create a Call for Participants flyer that was distributed in November 2019 at the Providence Winter Market held in Pawtucket's Hope Artiste Village, through social media accounts managed by FFRI and posted at local cafes and stores.

To find our writing coaches, I reached out through existing and new contacts at University of Rhode Island (URI) and Brown University. Jeremiah Dyehouse at URI shared the call with his network of Rhode Island contacts and two adjunct writing instructors, Genette Merin and Kristen Falso, responded to his call with interest. Another writing coach, Kate Niles, came to me through a contact I met when presenting on Write Your Roots as part of the "Almanac of Garden-Based Writing" workshop at the 2019 Community Writing Conference in Philadelphia. A novelist and therapist, she had just moved to Providence from New Mexico and was looking to connect with others interested in community writing. The last coach, Kendall Morris, an MFA poetry student and graduate writing instructor, responded to the call I put out to the creative writing graduate program at Brown. Having successfully put together a local team, I finally felt as though the project was truly in motion.

With our four writing coaches secured, the next piece to coordinate was our performance location. Coincidentally, there was a small, local theater called Etnias Global in Hope Artiste Village where FFRI ran their Providence Winter Farmers Market, tucked between a produce stand and a cheese kiosk. Etnias Global produces Spanish-speaking plays and the annual Festival Internacional de Teatro Hispanoamericano de Rhode Island. I met with its artistic director, Elvys Ruiz, in December 2019 and he generously agreed to provide our performance space for no cost on the basis of his own commitment to serve the local community by providing an outlet for its creative expression. The final step for setting the project in motion would be identifying our participants. Ultimately, eight people responded to the call with the desire to take part in the project. Most of them, in addition to the four writing coaches, were able to attend our first meeting at Etnias Global on Saturday, January 4, 2020.

At that first meeting, each writer/performer and writing coach introduced themselves. The participants were Jess, Robin, Nicholas, Jonathan, Cindy, Kunal, Peter and Karla. After introductions, the writers shared their tentative ideas for monologues, which included Jonathan's idea to write about what cooking for a beloved person means, Karla's plan to write about caring for animals on a farm where they are raised for meat and dairy, Kunal's idea to write about integrating cooking influences from India, the American South and Pacific Northwest, and Cindy's plan to write about being a professional beekeeper. At this meeting, writers were also matched with writing coaches based on their mutual availability and scheduled their first meeting.

After the project kickoff meeting each writer met one-on-one with their writing coach three to four times over the next four weeks. Most of these meetings took place over Zoom. Coaches' early feedback on drafts came mostly in the form of questions that prompted writers to elaborate further on certain aspects of their monologues. This work was similar to a writing center consultation, where coaches focused on organization, areas for elaboration or trimming, tone and then sentence-level refinements. I worked with Cindy, the beekeeper, and much of my feedback was geared toward encouraging more description of her personal experience of the events she relayed. By the final session, each writer had a completed draft ready on which they received final, fine-tuning comments.

In early February, a little over a month after our first meeting, I invited the writers and writing coaches to my new home in Pawtucket for a read-through of the fresh drafts of our eight food monologues. Our family, having first rented an apartment in Pawtucket, had just moved to our new house two weeks prior. At that point, it was very much a blank space to us, "yet to be written" as Dobrin writes. Having this gathering at that early stage of living in our home, at our big, new dining table, contributed significantly to defining the new space. More than paint color, wall décor or furniture, the activity of that read-through contributed to our perception of our new home. It lent the sense that our home was a welcoming space that invited the personality, creativity and insights of those outside our immediate family to inter-weave with our own energies. Culturally, we have come to accept fixed, dictated ideas of places and this includes our homes where we obsess over design features that we feel will project what we want our home to be. Michel de Certeau, however, calls attention to the historically obscured role of activity, or what I call *ground-motion*, in forming our conception of places. De Certeau asserts that maps— such as a floorplan of a new home, for example—represent fixed conceptions of *places* devoid of activity. Stories, in contrast to maps, he writes, can be a means of animating places, returning them to the status of spaces. He writes, "everyday stories tell us what one can do in [a place] and make out of it. They are treatments of space" (122). He writes that a story "founds spaces" (123) and "opens a legitimate *theater* for practical *actions*" (125).

It is interesting to consider this theoretical perspective in light of private spaces like one's home. While a sense of one's private home can become quite fixed, defined by the habitual activity and interactions of the people living within it, that sense can be disrupted and revised through the activity of outsiders within its walls. I have always found that any social gathering, from a dinner with friends to a big holiday par-

ty, brings new energy into my home. It also disrupts fixed patterns by necessitating intensive cleaning, de-cluttering and the movement of furniture. Consistently, I feel *better* in my home space the morning after hosting a social event. The fresh activity shakes up the dull grooves of a home's inhabitants' use of it and opens up a new sense of possibility, a new sense of space. This is De Certeau's and Dobrin's theories of space-making confirmed within the narrow, controllable boundaries of the home. Can we extrapolate this experience to apply similarly to our larger, shared home spaces in the neighborhoods and towns where we live? Write Your Roots rests on the belief that we can.

The next step of our Write Your Roots process, beginning rehearsals, began to open the space-making activity I'd experienced in my home to more public spaces: Urban Greens Co-op in downtown Providence and the Etnias Global theatre in Pawtucket. Our work at Urban Greens was a fulfillment of one part of the Co-op's Mission Statement "to create a space for collaboration and cross-pollination among multiple organizations, cultures, and communities..." ("Mission"). To this end, the community room where we rehearsed, with glass walls on one side, allowed workers and customers to see the ways in which Write Your Roots was coming together. At Etnias Global, our rehearsals were not observed but our work was a precursor for public performance. By rehearsing in the space, we began claiming it and bringing it to life with our vision. The next step would make our activity fully public. We were set to perform our show, followed by an audience talkback with the writer-performers and Farm Fresh Rhode Island, at Etnias Global Theater on Saturday, March 14, 2020.

Disruption: COVID-19

This is where the story shifts from what might have been a community writing project success story to a story of a project disrupted and diverted. The pandemic challenged our notions of space-making by first separating us in space, inserting imaginary dividing lines, then separating us even more severely. Just as I was taking orders for pizza toppings to feed people during our dress rehearsal, the first COVID-19 diagnosis was announced in New England. I quickly sent an email to the group stating that the stage could hold only one performer at a time so that we would be following public health directives to socially distance. This meant that we wouldn't be able to do our planned closing moment sitting around the table together reading Joy Harjo's poem "Perhaps the World Ends Here" and would have to come up with an alternative conclusion. We considered needing to limit the audience and leave seats empty between audience members. Throughout this time of trying to adapt to early COVID-19 precautions, my sole goal was to ensure that all the work that we had put into Write Your Roots up to that point would not be lost.

But the week we were supposed to perform, the response to the COVID pandemic brought more disruption. Schools closed and a stay-at-home order was put in place. Fear rose. Farm Fresh Rhode Island would still hold their winter farmers market for shoppers but would allow no form of social gathering at the market. By

Wednesday of that week, there didn't seem to be a choice left to be made. We canceled our March performance.

Though canceling our performance was a loss, each participant was also going through their own set of private losses at this time, their own unique psychological response to those losses and to the new, extreme uncertainty and isolation we all faced. The wisest move seemed to be to put the project on hold and wait the pandemic out, a plan that seemed reasonable at the time. When we canceled the performance, some of the participants let me know that they wouldn't be able to go forward with the project. I tried not to grieve that, but to focus on what was still possible. On March 12, I wrote to the group that I was thinking about June 6 or 7 for the new performance date with pick-up rehearsals starting two weeks before. I told everyone I would check in at the beginning of May.

But by late May of 2020, large groups of people gathering indoors was still not possible. There were no indoor theater productions happening anywhere in our area, including at the Etnias Global theater. We postponed again, in hopes that we could perform in September. Looking back on this series of pushed back dates, my hope seems foolish, like chasing a receding wave out to sea. But we, or at least I, didn't want to believe in the worst-case scenario, and it was probably best for our morale if we thought we might soon see light at the end of the pandemic tunnel. As I stated earlier, what follows then is not a success story, but a story about what we do as community writing practitioners when our best laid plans are thwarted by forces beyond our control.

How Much Does "Live" Matter?

Although it seemed like the whole world was migrating to Zoom, I resisted the idea of pivoting away from a live, in-person performance. Toward the end of July, I put the question out to the group about whether they felt comfortable with mounting a September production. One person did, one person was ambivalent, and two were not really comfortable with it. It was clear from their responses that if we wanted to present our work, I would have to let go of my attachment to an in-person production. I chafed at the idea. Write Your Roots, for me, was defined by community members claiming actual space for themselves and a wider community in front of a live audience.

At this point in the story, I could go in the direction of saying that we produced a digital version of Write Your Roots and realized the fluidity of the project model or realized that digital was actually a superior medium because it can reach so many more people. Another person might have felt that way, for good reason, but I didn't. Rather, I want to explain why pivoting to a digital format helped affirm my commitment to live, in-person performance.

Live, in-person performance retains a unique power and cultural significance even in these times of highly accessible, digital content and communication. This is not to make the argument that it is superior. In *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, Philip Auslander challenges the perspective that puts live, in-person

performance into a binary with video-recorded or streaming performance. Auslander writes that some theorists seem to approach live performance as a kind of *pure* medium that exists before and apart from video performance. But Auslander argues that these thinkers operate under a false premise that such purity is actually possible. He writes, “All too often, such analyses take on the air of a melodrama in which virtuous live performance is threatened...by its insidious Other, with which it is locked in a life-and-death struggle. From this point of view, once live performance succumbs to mediatization, it loses its ontological integrity” (46). Auslander counters that live and mediatized performance are not in opposition with one another, but instead have a relation of “dependence and imbrications” (56). As an example, he offers the Walt Disney Company’s division specifically devoted to repurposing its films into live performances. “The fact of the eventual live performance,” writes Auslander, “makes the television program more compelling, independent of the theatrical production’s quality or reception” (29). Although we exist in an era where digital performance is ubiquitous, and digital performance can carry so much of what live performance offers, it cannot carry all of it. Live performance still maintains a unique power. And one of those powers is to make space and redefine our sense of place.

I share Philip Auslander’s work as a way of responding to those who might ask of the Write Your Roots project, “Why insist on live performance today given the incredible digital tools accessible to us?” First, I agree with Auslander that live performance is not an underdog on the brink of relevance but rather exists and will always exist in relationship with mediatized culture. As Auslander points out, even the corporate entertainment giants acknowledge there is still a sociocultural value attached to live, in-person events that spurs media attention that might not be given to a solely mediatized event. If corporate giant Disney recognizes this, why wouldn’t we, who are already on the ground, recognize this and take advantage of our authentic community networks to bring live performance to life in our communities?

I am insistent on live performance of community writing because of my interest in how we *make* space *in* place against corporate, monocultural and extractive forces that diminish it. In Write Your Roots, the writer-performers make space by telling their stories related to their experiences with food, inviting the audience to connect with those stories by responding with their own stories or asking questions. After the performance is over, a community of people now understands themselves as connected to each of those whose stories they’ve just watched and heard live and in-person. Their sense of the place they live is now, to some degree, enlarged or even rewritten by the community members’ stories they’ve heard. In a live performance, we would have been able to look at each other’s faces. We would have been able to field questions from the audience and even form connections that might live beyond the life of the performance.

The conditions of the pandemic were such that there was no realistic path to a live performance of the monologues. I couldn’t ask participants to do something they weren’t comfortable with or ask an audience to be enthusiastic about being around other people. Once I finally accepted this, it was definitely painful, especially when so many of us could feel the need, that had only increased since the arrival of

COVID-19, for people to come together in community to heal wounds of division, to build hope through mutual support, to co-imagine our future.

In the end, we produced a video that included four of the original eight participants' monologues and a Zoom group reading of Harjo's poem. FFRI shared the video, participants shared it through our personal social media and email contacts, and I shared it with Write Your Roots contacts. But other than words of congratulations, there was no engagement with viewers about what they saw or how they connected with it. The video performance couldn't produce the same sense of space creation that the live event could. One thing the video did give us, though, was a way to demonstrate the work to potential partners and participants, which will be valuable in the future. Despite everything, it still felt good to see the work through in some form, to produce something we could show people. It felt like an expression of courage in the face of the overwhelming circumstances we had been dealing with since March 2020, and an affirmation of what had brought us together in the first place. And it had made a difference in the lives of those who participated. One participant wrote to me in a notecard just recently, "Being part of Write Your Roots was one of the best things I've done for myself in recent years." If nothing else, the video we made was a partial record of the work we had done and the hope we had had for a live performance amongst our local community, a marker that our spirits were still willing and that we would be back, one day.

Conclusion

What do we take away from this disrupted Write Your Roots? The first take-away is that, as a community writing and performance project, Write Your Roots is a model that is definitely adaptable to different places and participants. If you're entering that place with a humble, open stance and a willingness to learn and to pivot, you have every right to go ahead. In part, this is because while there is a certain theoretical drive for the project, its concrete goals are open to being defined by the individuals who volunteer to participate. In *Rhetoric of Respect*, Tiffany Rousculp makes a powerful case for community writing project planners to *always* put individuals first, honoring the context in which those individuals live their daily lives and the personal motivation they bring to writing over the political goals of a given project, noting that "when space [is] made for them to speak/write what they [choose], change [can] happen in ways we might not have anticipated" (111). In the future, I would enhance this aspect of the project by asking at our first meeting what personal goals participants have for the project and, if any, what community-oriented goals they would like to set for the project.

Secondly, on a personal level, I experienced how community writing projects can be lifelines in difficult times. Through them, we form relationships of mutual feeling, admiration and honesty. These kinds of connections serve us well when tough times hit. We can lean on these connections; we can help each other make it through. At the same time, some challenges mean that a person may not have the space for extra-curriculars for the time being. In addition to being able to pivot ourselves, we have to

make space for participants to pivot as their life circumstances change, while communicating that their work was valued.

Thirdly, though our project didn't ultimately appear before an audience on a stage, we still experienced some of the space-making power of the work, whether in the reading at my new home, in the community room at Urban Greens Co-op or in rehearsal at Etnias Global. Relationships were formed that have continued beyond the life of the project and certainly, for me, become an important facet of this new place where I live. The people of Write Your Roots and the relationships I formed with them helped define this place, Pawtucket, my new home, to me as friendly and supportive.

Finally, for all of us participants of the 2020 Write Your Roots, our collective perceptions of food were expanded, nuanced and enriched. I will never forget the dedication Jonathan, a religion professor at Wheaton, showed in explaining what it meant to him to make Mary Berry's strawberry cake for his wife. I will never forget learning from Jess's journey as a lifelong food-lover to always be thankful for *hunger*. I will never forget the way Karla enacted helping a cow give birth to a calf on her farm. And I will never forget Nicholas tenderly recounting how his mother patiently taught him how to cook, down to his *mise en place*. Though remembering the impact of these stories brings up the grief that they didn't reach a live audience, it also reminds me of the power of this project to help us reconceptualize and reclaim control of our relationship to food.

I feel that when Write Your Roots happens again, the togetherness the new group shares will be marked by all the togetherness we missed during the time of COVID. COVID-19 and the overlapping crisis of the George Floyd murder and ensuing surge of the Black Lives Matter movement made many of us more keenly aware of the community bonds we have sacrificed or never formed as a result of societal divisions and economic forces that delimit our personal time. In the absence of these bonds that help generate a people-centric locality in the places where we live and eat, entropic and/or corporate forces have taken greater hold in many places than they had before 2020. Given this, it may be, now that many of the limits of COVID-19 have lifted, we will feel even more inspired to courageously make space for a plurality of voices in the places where we live. Write Your Roots is one attempt at this.

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