

March 2024

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Recommended Citation

Puett, Sarah (2024) "Institutional Departure," *Community Literacy Journal*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1, Article 13.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy/vol18/iss1/13>

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Institutional Departure

Sarah Puett

Reflection

In the fall of 2016, I participated with a local racial justice organization in the Twin Cities, TCO (Twin Cities Organizing), by contributing to a campaign for creating alternative means to public safety. I attended meetings, generated ideas, canvassed, did a lot of listening, and later wrote about some of the meetings as part of my dissertation, which considered the relationship between critical literacy and activism in the public sphere. The following selection is a collection of “written up” fieldnotes—meaning I typed out my hand-written self-notes and added in detail, reflection, and context for an audience. The idea was to raise questions rather than offer cogent answers about the role negotiation that is involved in community literacy projects and in doing rhetorical fieldwork, which was considered an “emergent” practice at the time. In some ways, I want to push back on the idea that field methods in literacy and rhetorical studies are emergent; they have a long, storied, and checkered history. I recognize the value of some of the more established, typical lines of study one could pursue with fieldnotes “data,” e.g. as study of multimodality or embodiment, participatory composition or geocomposition, or an examination of community-led resistance movements. All of these are productive lines of inquiry.

When my methods took me outside and away from the academy, I learned about the *emergency of community*. My experience highlighted the temporal urgency of being together, of radical hospitality, and of the importance of collective unlearning. I came to see, over the course of a year of participatory fieldwork, that my notions of “community literacy” were misguided. Community literacy isn’t something I know about because of what academic literature tells me. Community literacy is something that lives—something cultivated through a series of experiences with others, over an extended period, through sustained participation and mindful observation, motivated by an ethic of care. In part, this work illustrates my rejection of the dissertation as a primarily academic genre or an *act of social removal*, as Richard Rodriguez puts it. My project is inherently social. It was informed by local events, personal relationships, national conversations, and my reading of the sociopolitical landscape. I hope this work also stands as a testament to the vast project of critical literacy and the processes of both learning and unlearning that an emancipatory project requires.

Institutional Departure

September 2016

I couldn't figure out what to do.

I pulled off my sunglasses and looked up at the towering structure before me, wondering if I'd gone to the wrong place. The door was locked. But I'd confirmed the address with Remy that same morning. It had turned into one of those unreasonably and unseasonably hot September afternoons, the kind that belonged back in August. I could feel sweat gathering on my hairline.

"You need in here?" While I was peering upward an older man stepped out of the shop next door. "Oh hi, yeah, is this the door, or...?" I was glad to see someone. "Yea, it is, this place always confuses people," he said as he rapped a few times on the glass door. He seemed like he'd done this before. He was peering through the front of the building, watching for movement, saying something about how the lights appeared to be off. I stepped forward to look with him. We exhaled in unison when we noticed a woman heading towards the door. I thanked the man for his help. As he brought a cigarette to his mouth, he nodded his head and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, the way some people do when accepting a compliment, and stepped back towards his shop. Was it his shop? I kind of wanted to have a smoke with him so I could ask, but I was fully sweating by then. I was ready to go inside.

"Hi, I'm Sarah, I have a meeting with Remy?" I blared when she opened the door. I still wonder if I said it as loud as my memory tells me I did. I still wish I could remember what she said in return. I still wonder why I never saw her again after that day. I had loudly stated my purpose, and the man with the smokes had knocked loudly on the plate glass, and meanwhile, inside, about fifteen organizers sat quietly together, heads bowed, in a healing circle. There were candles and soft music. *Fuck*, I thought, *I definitely interrupted*. My shoulders fell as the woman escorted me through the room. Remy jumped up from working on his laptop as soon as he saw us coming. I apologized for being a little early, and for interrupting. He explained that healing circles were common at Twin Cities Organizing (TCO) and necessary for organizers working on the front lines of social justice activism. "We're all just trying to make sense of the brutality and chaos that the last week has been," he said, circling his index finger in the air like a whirlwind.

I didn't ask exactly what he meant because I felt like I knew. I wonder what he would have said. I guess I learned something about asking good questions somewhere along the way. Earlier that week 43-year-old Keith Lamont Scott was fatally shot by police in Charlotte, NC. Minutes afterward, Scott's daughter recounted what happened using Facebook Live: "They shot my daddy 'cause he's Black. He was sitting in his car reading a mother fucking book. So they shot him. That's what happened." The national news media didn't put it that way of course, and despite playing the video over and over again, most of the mainstream media seemed to ignore her perspective entirely. CNN kept bringing up a car crash that left Scott mentally impaired, and

kept saying it was “unclear” whether or not Scott had a gun, and kept bringing up the Blackness of the police officer who shot Scott. Later they honed in on the protests, where civilians were killed, and others were injured. Remy might’ve referenced all or none of this if I’d asked what he meant or what the week had been like for him. It didn’t feel appropriate to open with trauma.

State sanctioned violence against Black Americans felt far too ordinary, feelings of outrage felt far too familiar, and media coverage proved that as a country we were far short of a collective story about what was happening and why. Remy might’ve said something like that. He might’ve said something about what he, as a young Black man, was experiencing, that a young white woman couldn’t understand. Should I have asked? Should I have called attention to a disparity in our grief? What was the disparity exactly? Disrupting the healing circle had made me feel rude and invasive, and I didn’t want to make a worse impression by seeming out of touch. There’s often no right answer in situations like this, so I tried to just stay present and in the moment. Comfort is too often a tool of white supremacy.

Sometime after I interrupted the healing circle that day at TCO, I thought back to a moment when I learned about the disparity of grief. I was at a BLM protest that took place shortly after Freddie Gray was killed by Baltimore police in the spring of 2015 (see Figure 1). That evening a young Black organizer looked out over a crowd of more than a thousand Minnesotans gathered in Gold Medal Park and called attention to the number of white folks in the crowd. She asked all people of color to come to the top of the hill where she spoke through a megaphone. She explained that the pain and fear people of color were experiencing needed to be made central in that moment. I’m not sure I’d heard anyone in Minnesota say something so honest or so necessary (the passive aggression in Minnesota is too real). She asked all the white allies to stay back, to move down the hill, and to be quiet, while people of color embraced one another, sang, and swayed in the sun. That experience shaped my role as an accomplice because it taught me about shared and unshared grief, emotional labor, and #whitefolklwork.

That first meeting at TCO, the doors were open to each of the offices that lined a brightly lit room with two large tables at the center. The table-top and the walls were completely covered with posters, drawings, writing, banners, colors, photos, notes, and other writing, from the floor to the ceiling. The space, Remy said, was a good way to tell the story of TCO, an activist group formed in 2010 by organizers who met while working on local issues related to #OccupyWallstreet. I noticed some #Occupy tokens on the walls. I’ve always loved writing and I particularly love writing-rich environments—from personal inspiration boards to community bulletin boards. I thought about all the different tools that had been used to create those materials. Some of it was done in colored pencil, some marker, some of it was printed, a great deal of it was handwritten. It was so colorful and loud. Remy and I stood there and marveled at it together for a few minutes. Looking back, I wonder less about the tools and more about the people who made all those materials and where they all ended up, especially after TCO shut down.



Figure 1. Photo of BLM protest in Minneapolis, MN, April 2015. This photo shows a large gathering of diverse people on a green hilltop with blue sky in the background. On the right someone holds up a large handwritten sign that says BLACK LIVES MATTER, while at the top of the hill stands an organizer speaking into a megaphone.

TCO had recently moved into this building after a fire destroyed their old office down the block. The fire raged for over three hours, taking out local businesses and apartments as well as the historic buildings that housed them. Only four injuries were reported, but eleven apartments were burned up and twenty-three people lost all their belongings. TCO organizers led a thousand-person march for higher minimum wage that morning, but by that afternoon they launched a fundraiser for those affected by the fire. In the end they raised and distributed over \$20,000 to residents displaced by the fire, and with the help of the grassroots community and a few prominent citizens, they raised enough funds to purchase the lot where their office had been. They planned to rebuild. But after investigators revealed that arson was the

probable cause of the fire, negotiations fell through. “We raised all the money, but in the end the owner wouldn’t let us build,” Remy told me, with despair and irritation.

Remy and I both talk absurdly fast, so talking came easy. At the time I didn’t know one-to-one meetings were a recurrent form of labor for organizers like him, but it makes sense looking back. It’s the same for us writing teachers. He was used to talking about TCO to a variety of audiences. As we settled into chairs on either side of a wooden desk, I asked him about the momentum I was noticing. I’d seen TCO’s name all over the place that summer. “Yea, there’s a bunch of reasons,” Remy said, as a laundry list seemed to populate in a thought bubble above his head. “The conversations we’re leveraging” was the one that seemed the most important, but he also said the organization’s hybrid model, their physical space, and their leadership were all reasons for their success. TCO is made up of 95% Black leadership, out of 20 full-time employees, all of whom are from the Twin Cities. “We’ve had consultants come in from outside, but otherwise we’re completely local.”

With membership numbers in the thousands (local and non-local), members pay dues, attend meetings, and vote on campaigns driven by local issues, particularly for those living in under-resourced communities and communities of color. “We leverage people power,” Remy told me. “We’re willing to work with-*in* and with-*out* the system... We aren’t afraid to shut down a city council meeting or walk on a freeway, but we are really interested in policy change.” He told me about the policy that resulted from their campaign for paid sick leave as an example: “150,000 people’s lives will change for the better once that policy takes effect.” He said TCO interns analyze campaigns like that one from start to finish during their training: “From the moment a member brings an issue to the table to the moment a policy takes effect.” I was eager to hear more about those trainings. I was eager to hear more about everything TCO was doing. I was especially interested in their new campaign on police accountability. “We decided to sit down and think about how we can stop paying the police force thousands of dollars a year to kill us.” *I’m in*, I thought. I later learned that, in fact, the Minneapolis Police Department had an annual budget of \$160 million.

October 2016

My memory tells me there were over 100 people in the room that day. TCO was packed. I wanted to get some pizza but couldn’t see it from where I was sitting. I didn’t want to lose my seat, so I didn’t get any. As I was craning my neck to lay eyes on the pizza, I noticed some of the relics from the bank that previously occupied TCO’s space. There was a recognizable main desk area, some teller windows, and a big open floor where people probably used to form lines. What an institutional departure. I’d been meagerly talking to a woman sitting next to me who taught at a school on the Northside, where a friend of mine did her student teaching. She said it was her first time at TCO. Did I bring up the bank relics to her? I can’t remember. I know I was thinking it, but I’m not sure I voiced it... Slap some vivid green paint on the walls, pepper in some groovy local art, pack the space with folks who want to speak truth

to power... Radical change can happen anywhere. But, as I later learned, I shouldn't have assumed everyone was there for the same reason. This was the first meeting for the police accountability campaign that Remy told me about a few weeks earlier. The public event description on Facebook read as follows:

It's more and more clear every day – our current model of 'public safety' is simply not keeping us safe. With every death we mourn – Philando Castile, Jamar Clark, Korryn Gaines, Tyre King, Terrence Crutcher, Keith Lamont Scott – we know that it's time to envision a world without punitive and antiquated models of law enforcement. We must begin to build and resource radical new public safety alternatives to police.

I was there because I knew that to be true, but I didn't quite know what to do about speaking truth to power. I wanted to get more involved in racial justice work because I was upset, pissed off, confused, disillusioned with academia, and wanted to participate in my community. I was starting to understand that I needed to be doing local *anti-racist* work on-the-reg. And evidently, I wasn't the only one. The room was full of white people.

Amara, one of the TCO organizers, quieted the group and thanked everyone for coming. She asked that we begin by sharing our preferred pronouns. Then Amara (she/her) introduced another young Black woman named Tanya (she/her). Before Tanya said anything, I remember thinking she didn't look comfortable. Her gaze was cast downward. Over the next several minutes Tanya told us a story about when she called the local police department to help her resolve a domestic dispute, and the officers who showed up shot her. Twice. In her house. In front of her family. I'll never forget the way she motioned in towards her stomach with her two fingers to show how the bullets went in. The way she gestured, that's how it felt to her. She didn't speak very loudly, she wasn't up there for very long, and she looked down the entire time. She said things didn't have to go down the way that they did, and she wished they hadn't. She showed us with her body that we need alternative means for public and community safety. She wasn't a story we were reading about in the news, she wasn't a statistic we were trying to understand, she was a person – alive and real, standing in front of a bunch of strangers, telling us about how her life could have ended. While my whiteness had insulated me from a number of traumas, there was nowhere to hide at that moment. I remember anxiously wondering if anyone would clap when she finished speaking. Her bravery deserved applause, certainly, but one wouldn't want to confuse what we were clapping about. Instead, the room was so silent it screamed.

"Enough is enough," Remy said as he took the floor. "It's time for us to start talking about taking these systems back and making sure the policing system we have is dismantled." He told us how the first formal slave patrol was established in 1704 in South Carolina, where armed militia were ordered to apprehend and punish any African Americans caught without documentation from wealthy, white, plantation-owning men. While the first police department was established in Boston in 1838, slave patrols were already institutionalized by then, and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

further established the patrol's use of force. Remy mentioned that some referred to the 1850 Act as the Bloodhound Law because of the dogs that were used to "hunt" runaway slaves. When he began walking through the relationship between slave patrol tactics and tactics used by the modern police force, I wondered what the modern equivalent was for the dogs.

Before splitting us into groups, Remy also talked about alternatives to public safety, referencing community policing models being piloted in areas of Chicago and New York. The goal was to discuss alternative visions to safety in our community and solutions for decreasing police intervention. We needed to use our imaginations, to share our most creative ideas, and to consider "Step Up/Step Back." Remy described this as a model for discussion where people who usually speak up take a step back, and those who usually don't, step up. People of color were to speak first and ahead of white people in every breakout, each of which was facilitated by a Black organizer.

When we came back together as a group we reported out some of our conversation pieces while TCO organizers wrote them by hand on big pieces of paper with adhesive on the top. I liked that they stuck wherever you wanted to put them, and I love the way handwritten ideas look on a wall (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Photo of the writing on the wall. This photo shows a group of people sitting in chairs facing three presenters and a large neon green wall with large pieces of paper on them; the paper has handwriting on it that is unreadable from this vantage point.

November 2016

There were a lot of people at TCO that I'd never seen before that night. It was just a few days after the 2016 Presidential election. I noticed a white kid standing up in the middle of the room with his arms crossed. He seemed to be about 18 years old, which I guess I determined based on his hoodie, his acne, and his general demeanor. The meeting was starting, but the room never got all the way quiet. The place was tense. The organizers began to describe the new campaign for resistance, which would be exclusively led by people of color. Suddenly, all the eyes in the room darted to a white guy who'd begun to yell: "Why is this organization led exclusively by people of color?" The way he asked the question did not feel friendly. Everyone stirred, weight shifted, wounds opened, and all manner of things began to spill out into the room. Soon the microphone made its way into the hands of Drake, who was arguably the charismatic leader of the organization despite its decentralized model. I'll never forget the look of patience on his face.

He said that TCO's Black organizers—and the experience of Black Americans in general—were uniquely suited for the current political moment. He talked about how the lived experiences and the history of racial oppression uniquely prepares Black Americans to inform the present political moment and guide the political movement for racial justice. He said something along the lines of what he said later in an interview, whose transcript I can no longer find:

We're on the Northside on a cold Wednesday, a room full of people talking about race, class, resistance. My sense is this is happening all over the country, all over the country there are rooms just like this. People are wrestling with this, wanting to resist, and that's tremendously hopeful... There is a mass resistance all over the country and there is an element of joy. When I talk to people there's fear, but there is an optimism, and a big middle-finger fuck you, we're going to do it our way. A lot of that is coming from youth and folks of color, and can we bring that to rural America? It's an amazing opportunity... This is a country where an abolitionist movement fundamentally wrestled with *whether or not I'm a human being*. This is nothing compared to some of the social movements that we've been through in this country. We've pushed through, we've created a better country. This is no different than that. In fact it's probably less daunting that a lot of the other moments we've been in and there's a major, major opportunity to re-shape and re-wire the country if we seize the moment and don't shy away from it.

Some white people had some feelings about this. I don't remember exactly what they said, and I wouldn't recount it even if I did, but I do remember thinking that this wasn't the best use of our time. Couldn't these people ask these questions on their own time? I felt so uncomfortable and wished I could do something. Only a minute or so passed before a very loud, assertive voice of a woman halted the parade of white tears. I couldn't see her, she was standing somewhere in the back of the room, and I didn't want to crane my neck.

“The white people in the room need to be a little more aware of the space we’re taking up with all of our questions and all of our misgivings, ok?”

And with that – this loud white woman telling all the new, post-election white people how to act in the space – everyone clapped. I realized in that moment that I could do what she did, if I ever needed to again.

The energy in the room diffused a bit after that. Together, she and Drake had regulated the room and re-centered us. I locked eyes with the kid in the hoodie. His arms were still crossed, but he was finally sitting down. I wondered if he would come back. I thought back to what it felt like that day when I knocked on the door. It’s tough being new, and it requires a lot of humility, a lot of listening, and taking a seat when you may have thought you needed to stand up. Still, all the new folks’ presence affected the tone of the meeting. I remember one organizer wondering aloud about people in the room who might be there to record and report their activities to the police. This made me nervous, and I was glad I wasn’t taking notes that night. Recording anything, creating a paper trail, is often seen as suspect. I knew I wasn’t reporting anything to anyone, but sometimes texts take on new audiences in the academy. I didn’t feel like I was representing the academy that night, or any night, but I also knew I couldn’t just take that identity off and leave it at the door... I was eager to get back to work on the police accountability and public safety campaign.

December 2016

Angela was leading the meeting at TCO that day. She told us we were going to design a new city—fashion it out of thin air. She was using one of those big sheets of paper, the ones with wicked strong adhesive. She started to draw the trunk of a tree using a brown marker. She drew some squiggles at the bottom of the page that looked like little veins. These, she said, were the roots of our city. The roots, the grounding, the foundation of any city, made up of the morals, ethics, and values. She invited us to give breath to some of the roots, and folks began to call out. Some were phrases, some were concepts, some were feelings ... *equity, justice, empathy, respect* ... The trunk, Angela said, represented the look of the overall system of the city ... *communication, safety to worship, good public transit* ... A woman who called out *department of peace* contrasted it against a *department of justice*. The whole room seemed to nod in agreement with the thought. Angela said the branches, the next expression of the tree, are the everyday tangible wins ... *community first-responders, mandated town-halls, rent stabilization, parental leave* ... Angela told us that the leaves on our tree are the manifestations of the aforementioned wins ... *fewer prisoners, happy children, street parties, community art, less cars* ... Angela created the image by hand. When someone called out “less fear, more eye contact” she drew an eyeball with eyelashes, with an upward arrow, and wrote the words “see me!” next to it (see Figure 3). What took shape is really beautiful.

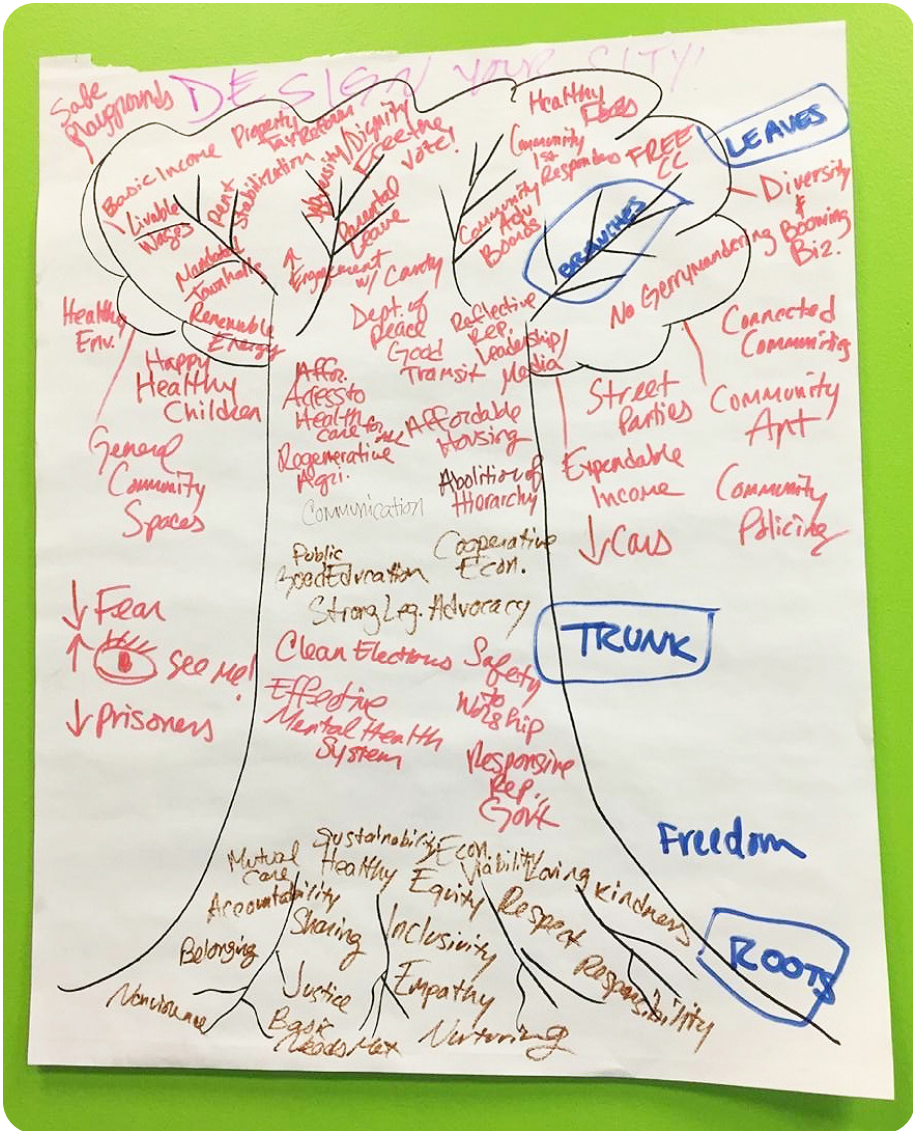


Figure 3. Photo of “Design Your City” activity. The figure shows a large hand-drawn tree on a white sheet of paper with “Design Your City” written across the top. Words emerging from a collective brainstorm are categorized into the tree’s roots, trunk, branches, and leaves.

I got the email from Remy while I was commenting on student papers. I wasn’t able to go to the city council meeting on account of that stack of papers, and I still wasn’t done. But I heard that the council chambers felt similar to how I did when I read about the city council’s final budget: \$500,000 in one-time funds to invest in community-directed alternative safety strategies in two neighborhoods, one on the

north side and one on the south side of the city. YES! I was proud of the work we put in and exhausted emotionally. Remy considered the pilot programs a major victory, and I was glad to know that he was taking some time to rest over the holidays. I knew I'd be back in January, and so would he, to talk about next steps. There was so much work to do, and the discomfort and ambivalence about my whiteness, and how my whiteness was perceived, was, I now saw, just an excuse to get out of doing the hard work. Doing difficult internal work that allows us to show up was the only way to create real social change. Remy's words echoed in my mind as I watched it snow, "I can't do your work for you, Sarah, and you can't do mine. We all have our own work to do. Go get your people."

Author Bio

Sarah Puett received her doctoral degree in Rhetoric from the University of Minnesota in 2018. She currently teaches writing, communication, and diversity courses at Regis University in Denver, Colorado. Her research focuses on composition pedagogy, community engagement, and rhetorics of race. She enjoys stand-up comedy, jazz music, eating out of bowls, and meeting dogs.