

## The Powerful Potential of Relationships and Community Writing

*Laurie Cella, Eli Goldblatt, Karen Johnson, Paula Mathieu, Steve Parks, and Jessica Restaino*

The following essay is a collective reflection in which the authors revisit the themes they raise in the edited volume *Unsustainable*, ask new questions, and suggest, again, that long-term sustainability might not be the most appropriate goal for every university-community partnership. Still, relationships, with all their variability, remain the lifeblood of community writing work. Just as the Conference on Community Writing (CCW) was a welcome opportunity to reconnect with old friends and learn new names, our programs are built on the strength of the relationships we build in the community and on our campuses.

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When we met in Boulder last October, we had the opportunity to revisit the themes we raised in our book *Unsustainable*; a few years had passed since its publication and it seemed important to ask: what has changed since 2012? What are the themes and concerns that are shaping our discussion now? The main theme that has emerged from our conversations—in person, via email, and in our own work—is the importance of relationships in the field of community writing. Karen Johnson, Laurie Cella and Eli Goldblatt write about the power of relationships to sustain, invigorate, and guide us, despite the temptations to despair over lack of resources or the powers of capitalism that threaten to overpower us. Paula Mathieu cautions us that relationships must come before projects, even if that means projects are stalled or even uncertain. Steve Parks offers a different caution: that we must work to include those who are silenced—those community members whose voices were absent from the conference at Boulder—in order to enrich and strengthen our vision as a field. Jessica Restaino's piece in this snapshot underscores the power of failure, even death, to demonstrate how vulnerability can make us more receptive to the relationships that shape our lives and our projects.

As Judith Butler writes of grief in *Precarious Life*: “I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by these very relations. My narrative falters, as it must” (23). Butler asks us to consider here the stakes of relationship, the extent to which in our need for and connection to others, we ultimately expand our own vulnerability. Such vulnerability,

of course, comes with the promise of growth, of building something new, of progress. We move back and forth between the poles of our potentiality for both great gain and great loss. Inherent here in this fluctuation is the broken narrative—"my narrative falters, as it must"—which suggests something beyond the mere certainty of loss on the heels of great connection. The faltering narrative is a condition of our most generative relationships, as these partnerships have the capacity to shift and change as we do, swerving with us through our evolving needs, interests, and resources. What we are guaranteed then is a story that is neither clean nor linear and that, to the extent it fosters true creativity and innovation, equally guarantees deep loss. The reflections that follow from *Unsustainable* contributors following our coming together again, this time for a workshop in Boulder, take as their focus this spectrum of possibility, their own great highs and deep valleys. We maintain, as we did in the original rationale for the book, that such transparency is necessary to encourage others into the only possibility for community writing work, one marked by unpredictability, opportunity, and risk.

## **Laurie Cella, Community Mentorship and Community Writing**

Coming to Boulder in October felt like coming home to my people; everyone had the same questions, worries and dreams about community literacy that keep me up at night. Luckily, conferences like the CCW make these academic mentorships more visible. However, community mentorship is just as important to developing productive partnerships, even if they are less visible. Eli Goldblatt describes his community work in *Because We Live Here* as a slow process—of listening to key players, and in particular, listening attentively to what is not said. Goldblatt writes, "Most important, I was willing to invest time and energy *without being in charge*, to build alongside others working in the neighborhood rather than enter the scene with a plan already formed" (141, emphasis added). From this perspective, listening to community mentors means letting go of our professorial authority, and that letting go is key to good work in the community.

As a board member for a local nonprofit, I have been charged with organizing and sustaining our community programming for those facing food insecurity. This past year has been particularly challenging. We have lost our location, our food source was cut, and our director slowed down by sickness and injury. As a result, I have often felt overwhelmed and underprepared to guide this program. My one solace has been through the guidance of experienced community mentors who have helped me navigate these challenges.

My community mentor has guided my work in subtle and indirect ways, yet these lessons are just as valuable as those I have learned from faculty colleagues, even if it has taken me longer than it should to learn these lessons. Most recently, he has taught me that new programs or projects work best when all the key players are invited to sit around the table. For example, he helped to pilot a new Big Brothers, Big Sisters program in our community, and he invited principals, the superintendent,

representatives from Big Brothers, Big Sisters, as well as university and community members. With all of these interested folks present, everyone had a say in the way the project looked, and it got off the ground with everyone's blessing. Even though I was present at the initial planning meeting, it didn't strike me until much later how important it is to have everyone around the table when starting a new program.

This semester, when my student began searching for a research project, I thought of our most recent board meeting, where many folks had been battling around the idea of a backpack program, a community based program that would provide children with nutritious food over the weekend. These programs serve children who qualify for free or reduced lunch. I quickly planned a meeting with one local principal and my student so we could begin a discussion, and so that my student could begin his research. It wasn't until the next Board meeting when I realized, in my haste to find a project for my student, I hadn't invited everyone interested to the table. After a round of apologetic emails, I called another meeting—with all interested parties—to see what we could start together. That next meeting felt right; I wasn't in charge, and everyone was part of the conversation.

Our theme focuses on the importance of relationships and, as Karen Johnson articulates in this article, how they can inspire us to continue developing community writing projects. In my experience, these projects become possible, and are made more flexible, when I am open to guidance and advice from those mentors with strong ties to the community. While the support of conferences like CCW are so important to keep us energized and focused, the community mentors—who are often not able to attend these conferences—are just as valuable to the health of our community projects. These mentors remind us that being vulnerable, letting go of authority, can be an effective way to make sure that the community's vision is at the center of any project.

## Eli Goldblatt, Vistas in Boulder

*Of all dangers to a nation, as things exist in our day, there can be no greater one than having certain portions of the people set off from the rest by a line drawn—Walt Whitman "Democratic Vistas"*

The conference at Boulder presented attendees with memorable vistas in the midst of a daunting historical moment. We were getting together as community literacy researchers, scholars, and teachers in record numbers; the sheer size of the turnout felt like a vindication as well as a balm. We met in a stunning place surrounded by mountains to share our commitment to the literacy lives of people who hold low-paying jobs or no jobs at all, who are incarcerated in American prisons, who are miseducated in underfunded American schools, or who are neglected in rural areas, immigrant centers, urban housing projects, and homeless shelters. Simultaneously, then, we also felt a curb on our elation. Just as we hugged our friends and greeted new colleagues, just as we celebrated our growing strength within composition/rhetoric/

literacy, we recognized that the corporate economy, the neo-liberal university, and the zero-sum legislative calculus line up against us and the people with whom we work. And, as Steve Parks forcefully argues in this collective essay, the “we” that constitutes much of the community writing community must become wider and more inclusive, or the field will choke off its own deepest ambition: to challenge the political limits inherent in literacy and language use.

Still, we must choose to be hopeful. Middle class allies of oppressed people can’t avail themselves of the luxury to become cynical or despairing. Educators and activists who choose to give up or collapse into bitterness simply cede the power to those who hurt others with impunity. The gathering at Boulder was a reminder to us all that many college educated people care to pay attention outside the campus precincts, that if you are far from allies in your location, you are still not alone nationally. We had good reason to celebrate because we’d found each other, even for a few days.

Let me give one small example. I returned from Boulder to my home university, which seems hell-bent on building a football stadium where people need basic services and decent schools a great deal more than they need seven days a year of drunken students and alumni peeing on the stoops and alleys in the neighborhood. Some might argue that Temple football fans will curb their enthusiasm if they know the neighborhood better and recognize a few people sitting on those stoops, but I doubt it. Sports metaphors of domination and large-scale building projects in residential areas are powerful projectors of power, heady for those who identify with the “team” and intimidating for those who don’t. The need for partnership building and resistance to standard power gradients remains as urgent now as it has ever been, and such work cannot be done alone. I heard news that the stadium was going ahead—despite resistance from faculty, students, and community members—soon after I returned home from Boulder. The logic of Big Sports, Big Science, and Big Business seems to be winning in my university along with so many others. But Boulder also taught me that I had allies and friends in Massachusetts, New York, Texas, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Florida, Nebraska and many other states connected by highways, video links, texts, emails, and social media in addition to academic journals and conferences. I have no excuse to get cynical—I just have to join others and keep going.

I would only warn colleagues and friends to beware of the tendency to split off into competing factions and alienated groupings. This has been a great weakness of American progressive politics in my lifetime, and divisions certainly haunted our leftist kin long before the 60’s and 70’s, when I came of age. Community writing as a discipline must grow larger and more various; this is an imperative built into our own theories and practices. We’ll inevitably develop oppositions and tensions within an expanding movement, and affinity groupings must form within a growing field. However, differences need not lead to feuds and jealousies. In the coming years, we’ll have to develop rich internal dialogues among our factions and caucuses so that we nourish intellectually and emotionally sustaining relationships within the diversity

for which we strive. Friendships and cooperative work experiences among people with different backgrounds and theoretical orientations will be key to the health of Community Writing. I hope that the images of Boulder in October 2015—even for those who couldn't be there—will remind this brave and rebellious company how much we—Whitman's democratic and expansive “we”—need to draw on the strength possible only through solidarity and compassion.

## **Karen Johnson, Burn Out or Burn On? Best-friend Alliances Encourage Sustainability**

After seven years of engaging in community projects, maintaining sustainability with our community partners was threatened simply because I wanted to take a break. Exhausted from a busy year and disheartened by reduced institutional support for our after-school community programs in a low-income neighborhood, I was smugly justifying a Sabbath year of rest. Because funding and support personnel were no longer available for our project, I would now have to do *even more work* than the previous year if I wished to continue our community service projects. Knowing that a successful program requires a great deal of coordination between an institution and community partners, I questioned if I had the stamina and emotional energy to add extra responsibilities to my burgeoning list of to-dos. I worried that the “burnout” pit I desperately wanted to avoid falling into felt ominously within sliding distance, and at the same time, I felt completely overwhelmed by the addition of extra tasks I would have to accomplish.

All faculty are susceptible to burnout, but our response to it is dependent upon the strength of our relationships to others and ability to commit to our core values. In their survey research of 813 university professors on burnout, Otero-López, Marino, and Bolaño found that strong social support from peers and family help “shield” faculty from burnout (770). When faculty feel that their academic pursuits, projects, and research are valued and supported by peers, they may be less susceptible to burnout. Yet, even when supportive networks are in place, feelings of burnout may still be hard to evade. Emmel, a seasoned academic with forty-five years of university teaching experience, admits he periodically experienced burnout, but he overcame it by focusing on his love for teaching and the close student relationships he maintained throughout the years (7). For those of us who desire to remain committed to community service, we must acknowledge our desire for our work to be valued, nurture our campus and community relationships, and reflect on core values that originally lured us to community service. Fortunately, as I doubted my ability to accomplish all the tasks for the semester's service projects, I received timely encouragement and support from my colleague-friend, jolting me out of my stupor and nudging me back home to community service.

Relationships originally enticed me into community service because transformative interactions and learning occur when community members, students, and faculty are drawn together. Over the years, close relationships with community

members and my colleague-friend have developed from these frequent interactions. Though burnout has threatened to weaken my resolve to persist, I know bailing out is worse, as it would generate more work for others and create rifts in relationships I truly valued. My colleague-friend's support reminded me that *I* was not alone in shouldering the tasks; *we* were pooling our resources to serve together. As historical King Solomon in Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 so eloquently explains, a partner strengthens, encourages, and supports our work: "Two are better than one, because they have good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up."

Unexpected changes in institutional support does threaten to derail our community efforts as it increases the difficulty of carrying out service, but a colleague's support and committed community members can energize us to re-imagine possibilities, create efficiencies by dividing up responsibilities, and lift our spirits, which can enhance our joy while serving. Reserving vans, transporting students to off-campus locations, collecting forms, seeking and requesting funding, purchasing afterschool snacks, and sending numerous emails may not appear to be joyous activities or even meaningful work, but my colleague-friend and I have experienced joy in working together and with community members. Our partnership created an infrastructure and discreet steps for completing tasks so we can remain committed to service and to offering students and community members opportunities to engage in unique, life-altering experiences.

Burnout tempts even the most-committed practitioners, and a lone practitioner is even more susceptible to quitting. But partnering with a colleague who shares your vision and passion can create service sustainability that resembles a best-friend alliance. Relationships drive our resolve to act; hence, serving with a colleague can build service sustainability because strong friendships can re-ignite our resolve and infuse joy back into serving.

## **Paula Mathieu, Relationship Building and Slow Community Work**

What I appreciate most about the *Unsustainable* collection, as well as the Still Unsustainable workshop at the Conference on Community Writing, is the way both question the idea of sustainability in community writing projects: Is sustainability possible? Is it even desirable as a goal?

In *Tactics of Hope*, I question sustainability as a goal in itself. Instead, I want those of us working in community-university partnerships to think of sustaining as an action, not a thing—an act of questioning: What are we seeking to sustain? Why and how?

Rather than sustainability, I think a key term in community writing should be *relationships*. What I value, and what I find so beautiful, humbling and awe-inspiring about the community work I've studied and participated in is both the power and fragility of relationships. When relationships are strong and vital, even the most impossible project can succeed in astonishing ways. And when human relationships

break down, even well-structured projects can falter or cease. My interests are turning much more to ways to invest in and make whole the relationships we have with ourselves, our students, and community partners, in order to forge strong relationships.

When relationships take the fore, however, projects can take much longer to develop, if they develop at all. For example, at the start of 2015, I decided I wanted to train as a hospice volunteer, mostly for personal reasons, but also because when I pondered the question, “Who needs writing the most?” one answer that came to me was people near the end of life. The training was slow—what should have been a six-week program, which is already significant, stretched into more than three months due to a harsh winter, staff changes, and medical requirements like TB tests and hep vaccines. But by April, I became a trained hospice volunteer and spent time each week over the next several months with my first client, an Italian-American woman in her late 70s. She was lucid, frank, insightful, and funny. We discussed her immigrant parents, gardening, her great grandkids, and *Dancing with the Stars*. She never seemed sick at all, except for the oxygen she took—a testament to the good work that hospice does. And then one week, she was gone. We never did any writing or even discussed it. It didn’t feel like the time.

So, there’s no community writing project here. Maybe there will be at some point, or maybe not. I’ll decide whether or not to pursue a community writing project based on my relationship with the hospice organization and its clients. And then it would be a decision made among many constituents. But I’m drawn to writing with and for the elderly or dying because there is so much at stake, the inchoate idea that those with the rhetorical skills of listening and scribing might be of use to some people in the final chapters of their life.

But creating a relationship-based project that can and should grow slowly with people who have limited time to build that relationship might be an inherently unsustainable proposition. Maybe so or maybe not. This is one of the issues I am currently puzzling through, along with the ever-sticky ethics of listening and writing and living and dying. I’m also seeking out models of organizations already successfully partnering college students with elders, like Sages and Seekers, to see how relationships are fostered between young and old, to learn and to listen.

This story, then, is an argument for *slow community work*, not for the sake of slowness, but because relationships take time. Julie Lindquist writes persuasively for the need for “slow research in a fast field” and puzzles over the ways rhetoric scholars can make space for such needed slow research, especially when clocks evaluating graduate students and faculty tick quickly. The book *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* argues that a slow approach to academic work is a direct way to challenge the erosion of humanistic education in universities today. I would like to make a similar argument for the need for *slow community work*, which is built on relationships that grow and change over time. Those of us interested in community writing should take up Lindquist’s important question and puzzle together about how to create more space and time for graduate students, part-time

faculty, and those on tenure clocks to let the pace of the community relationship dictate the project, not a semester or contract-renewal deadline.

## Steve Parks, *The Necessity of Constant Vigilance*

When Eli and I wrote “Writing Beyond the Curriculum,” I remember the difficulty of finding scholarship related to community partnerships. It seemed we were almost writing our way into a new field, into “a revolution that as yet has no model” (qtd in Spivak 47). Over a decade later, the CCW demonstrated a field that had come into its own—a field moving from being a tactical intervention into a strategic space from which to imagine a future. And having witnessed this creation in the age of austerity, I understand the focus on “sustainability.”

Yet, if community writing is to realize its progressive ideals of inclusion and justice, more must be done than simply sustain current momentum. For while the topics at CCW were diverse, those attending were not.<sup>1</sup> That is, our new field continues to sustain a very traditional academic profile—a profile in which African-American, Latino, and Native-American insights and heritages, among others, are missing. This absence was even more evident at an event devoted to working with many of these very communities. At our moment of victory, then, we need to consider how the terms and structure of our work have constructed a space where inclusion is a value but not a fact.

Here we might turn to the insights offered by Algerian-born Jacques Derrida, whose childhood was marked by Algerian persecution of Jewish citizens such as himself as the country consolidated its identity in alignment with Vichy France.<sup>2</sup> And, it might be useful to remember how the dangers of such community “purification” were articulated in his work. For one of his primary points was that the very structure of language contains a radical alterity that mitigates the metaphysical desire for foundational “pure” terms. That is, any pure term is necessarily built within a structure that included its own network of exclusions and will, thus, lack metaphysical status as it can never free itself from its own contradictory structure.

Thus, Derrida’s work warns us that the danger of any revolution, academic or political, is the solidification of its identity into a seemingly metaphysical essence—an essence that is not seen as tentatively useful, but is seen as containing some pure truth unencumbered from the complexities of history. I want to suggest that community writing will only be revolutionary when it adopts such a framework to its key terms—seeing “community,” “writing,” and “partnership” as emerging from a tentative context which must be continually made humble in its intentions through a consistent reworking of the other possibilities from which it emerges.

And to begin this work, I believe community writing should come to understand how many of the aforementioned heritages and insights offer important and alternative frameworks to our work. For instance, rather than rely upon a rhetoric of change premised upon United States forms of government, where the goal is to substitute conservative policies with progressive legislation, we might

instead draw upon the work of Nishnaabeg scholar Leeane Simpson, who proposes traditional forms of native/indigenous governance as a model for collective organizing. Rather than see the history of “community partnership” through the lens of historically white colleges, we might reimagine our “origin” as emerging from within a history of Historically Black and Hispanic Serving institutions.<sup>3</sup>

Such work would be more than a re-centering of the field upon the insights of formerly excluded heritages and traditions, though that is a vital ethical and political project. It would understand the discipline of community writing as a strategically informed network of partnerships that must continually be assessed as it progresses. There would be no pure moment of metaphysical completeness, but an endless exploration of how the radical alterity of language requires more work to be done. Rather than a revolution that claims victory, then, we need to be constantly vigilant of our desire to make such a claim.

Many years ago, our article began with the epigraph, “In Dreams, Begins Responsibilities.” Like many others, I have dreamed of transformative moments as this conference. Now, looking forward, we must take on the responsibility to build a field that enacts the truly transformative nature of such dreams. Perhaps, even after the conference, we still need to think of ourselves as building a ‘revolution which as yet has not model’ (qtd in Spivak 47).

## Jessica Restaino, Sharing Our Losses

I write to belong, and every piece of writing defines the threads by which we connect with others across time and space. One is clearly always alone and never alone within a written text...The challenge is to find a purpose more valuable than self-justification or solipsistic tautology in the metaphor of literacy as relationship. (Goldblatt 239)

These words from Eli Goldblatt serve as the epigraph to the last section of the book Laurie and I co-edited, a book rife with contributions from some pretty tremendous scholar-practitioners—Goldblatt among them. Our book, *Unsustainable*, is foremost a book about failure—at least, the ways in which shifting our expectations and taking stock of efforts that don’t go as planned are essential pieces of community literacy work. Goldblatt calls us here to think seriously about our relations and the ways in which we need each other. Why search and reach for each other in words, and what specifically are these needs about in the context of “failed” community literacy work?

Judith Halberstam reminds us of the potential in failure: “We will wander, improvise, fall short, and move in circles. We will lose our way, our cars, our agenda, and possibly our minds, but in losing we will find another way of making meaning in which...no one gets left behind” (25). Failure stands to isolate us, assure us that we are the only lost ones with good intentions but, alas, a plan with holes. The problem here is that in our often self-imposed isolation, we miss the crux of Halberstam’s argument, which is that *only* in our best, failed efforts do we discover the exigence

to actually rewrite, to find “more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2). Failure is generative precisely when we allow it to drive us humbly into new connections and relationships. My collaboration with Laurie as coeditor of *Unsustainable* had its roots in a first, long phone conversation during which we each acknowledged that many of our projects did not make it out of the “big idea” stage. And in my current work, which rethinks writing and research methods in terms of a two-year ethnography project I completed with Susan Lundy Maute during the last two years of her life with terminal breast cancer, failure, and indeed dying itself, renders a generative urgency to language and collaboration, the need to put words to experience as the body declines.<sup>4</sup>

When we take seriously our drive for connection, literacy, and belonging, ultimately we must sit together, around the table, and essentially put it all out on the table. Our work depends on these conversations, these edgy texts, if it is to grow in new ways. Laurie and I share tremendous gratitude for the fearless stories that contributors brought to the table that is now *Unsustainable*. The conference in Boulder that enabled many of us to be together again gave me yet another reason to feel that momentum, the sort which might drive us all into a place entirely unknown, full of bumps in the road worth thinking—and writing and talking—about, again.

## Notes

1. That this was the case despite the concerted efforts of the organizers, only strengthens the point.
2. See Benoit Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography*. Polity: 2012.
3. For possible models of such work see, Leanne Simpson, *Dancing on our Turtles Back Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a new Emergence* (Winnipeg: ARP, 2011); Beverly Moss and Reva Sias' special issue of *Reflections: Historically Black Colleges and Universities* (Vol. 10 No. 2) as well as David Greene's *Reflections: African American Contributions to Community Literacy* (Vol. 11 No. 1)
4. I am currently working on a book-length project; you can read a seed essay for this work here in *Peitho*.

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**Karen Johnson**, Associate Professor and Director of the Writing Studio at Shippensburg University, directs undergraduate and graduate writing tutoring programs. She currently serves as Treasurer of the International Writing Centers Association and has previously served on the Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association Executive Board. Karen has written three book chapters in edited collections and articles in the *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, *The Learning Assistance Review*, and *The Research Exchange*. At Shippensburg University, she received the Teaching Innovations in Scholarship and Pedagogy Award and the Faculty of the Month Award.

**Paula Mathieu** works as Associate Professor of English at Boston College and directs the First-Year Writing Program. She wrote *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition* (2005), and co-edited three essay collections, including *Circulating Communities*, (2012) with Stephen Parks and Tiffany Roscoulp. With Diana George, she has written about the rhetorical power of dissident press for venues like CCCs.

**Steve Parks**, Associate Professor of Writing and Rhetoric, Syracuse University, is author of *Gravyland: Writing Beyond the Curriculum in the City of Brotherly Love* as well as *Class Politics: The Movement for a Students' Right to Their Own Language*. His current work includes building an international archive of working class writing in London, England, as well as working with Syrian Activists to document human rights violations as part of building a legal case against those responsible and reconciliation workshops for residents of local Syrian communities. He is the incoming Editor of the *Studies of Writing and Rhetoric Series* (NCTE).

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