

Writing From “The Wrong Class”: Archiving Labor in the Context of Precarity

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Abstract

This article explores the methodological impact of building and curating a transnational archive of working-class literacy practices, spanning themes of vocation, immigration, gender, race, and disability, from the ground up alongside the *Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers*. The article focuses particularly on how our disciplinary methods might be (re) shaped within a context of precarity when working with/archiving the literacy practices of disenfranchised populations. I argue that such precarity shapes how our methods/methodologies account for material realities—the laboring of bodies, influx of finances, physical conditions of the community involved—and changing social conditions that affect not only archival creation but also sustainability. I illustrate how *The FWWCP Archival Project* responded through a kitchen-table ethos in order to design the archive with the community’s expertise at the forefront.

Where Is Sally Flood?

The first time I met Sally Flood was in 2013, at a community writing festival in London, England. Sally offered to tell me her story: “Would you like to hear it from the beginning?” she asked, not really a question but an invitation for me to listen. Sally Flood was an 88-year-old, now 93, working-class woman from the East End of London. She told me how, over forty years ago, she would steal bits of time at her factory job to write poems behind her embroidery machine, only to rip up the scrap poems before her boss came by, fearing she would get in trouble or that she would be told, yet again, not to waste her time on writing. Sally would often write about the conditions she saw in her neighborhood: “Brick Lane is a mixture/ of aromatic spices/ curries, onions and bad drains,/ Pakistani restaurants/ Jewish trimming shops/ And betting shops,/ Down at heel workers [...] Pavements and gutters/ Are littered with overspill/ From dustbins and workshops./ This is where the immigrant/ Looks for fulfillment! [...] This is Brick Lane” (*Window*). Sally’s imagery of Brick Lane presents a bleak picture of working-class social conditions—a downtrodden atmosphere that continues as a theme in her work. On another occasion with Sally, we sat down for an interview at her kitchen table. She handed me a book of poems that points to the defeating nature of factory life, or being part of the “exploited” working class:

My mind is as grey/ As the surrounding streets/ And the drizzle repeats itself/ In my brain/ Too quiet, the factory stands/ With empty machines/ And crates/ Waiting to be moved/ Into another overcrowded factory./ Ghosts whisper in my ears/ Of other years/ Of laughter and voices/ Competing against/ The deafening roar/ Of machinery./ But now, the deathly silence/ Sits upon me/ And in that silence/ Generations of the exploited/ Are coming alive/ And whispering/ Their dreams/ And their fears. (*Paper*)

In their own right, these poems had private meaning, but Sally's writing was filled with precarity experienced by many workers—shaped by “overcrowded factor[ies],” exploitation, as well as unstable writing and working conditions. Eventually, Sally's scrap poems resonated with working-class people in similarly precarious positions when she co-founded a community-publishing network focused on working-class identity that would circulate such writing: the *Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers* (FWWCP).

The FWWCP began in 1976 in London's East End, when Sally and others from eight writing groups established a network of writers that would challenge limiting views of the working class. The network remained active until 2007 and, even today, exists as an offshoot organization called *The FED: a network of community writers and publishers* through writing groups, writing festivals, and the material exchange of self-published booklets. With a readership estimated at over a million (Woodin), the FWWCP established a local record of working-class social history during the development of global neoliberal policies that damaged working-class economic and cultural standing. FWWCP writing represents the testimony of a class marred by the collapse of manufacturing and mining industries, as well as a tension-filled social environment under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's administration from 1979-1990 that included nearly three million unemployed and increased privatization of public services. These events continue to provoke conversations about class identity (Jones), the rise of neoliberalism (Harvey), and the potential impacts of Thatcherite policies in connection to Brexit (Gest). Economic restructuring by governmental powers also perpetuated negative social attitudes about the working class. As Owen Jones notes, “No longer seen as a proud identity, the working class was increasingly sneered at, belittled and scape-goated” (10). Responding to these moments, the FWWCP created an inclusive space for working-class voices when the working class was on the ropes.

During the 40-plus years that Sally and others cultivated the FWWCP, the network grew across continents to include over one hundred writing groups, producing thousands of community publications enmeshed with topics of sexuality, migration, racialized and gendered dynamics, concerns of national identity, and vocation. But this growth and diversity of working-class publications did not translate to sustainability for the FWWCP. Instead, in 2007 after the FWWCP's collapse, this network was in a precarious position regarding its cultural survival beyond the memories of those involved. Publications were scattered across England in basements and garages, sometimes literally rotting away. As is often the case with community writing, the materiality of preservation and circulation was a key concern (Carter and Conrad; Kirsch and Rohan; Mathieu). Members hoped to create an archive so their writings

and, even more, their testimony would not be lost forever. Fearing erasure, the *FWWCP/FED*¹ wanted a sustainable means of preservation, which eventually became the *FWWCP Archival Project* that community partners asked me to lead.

But how did I—a writing studies scholar from the United States— end up at the forefront of the *FWWCP Archival Project* based in London? To explain this, I need to take a moment to say how Sally and I became friends. I traveled to England as a graduate student at Syracuse University, with the goal of researching working-class, community writing. I heard about the *FWWCP* from Steve Parks, and felt connected to the writing. It was the first time I saw similarities to my own working-class upbringing. Sally reminded me of my Bushia and Dzia Dzia, grandma and grandpa in Polish, who worked at the American Locomotive Company and Al Tech Steel located near Buffalo, New York. These rust-belt beginnings enabled me to identify with the community writers and publishers across England. In this respect, I recognized my home discourses as connected to a larger project about valuing and archiving the work and testimony of writers/publishers who put their bodies on the line to survive as bricklayers and miners, seamstresses and steel workers. I recognized these stories because they were similar to the narratives of working-class life I grew up with. Each member opened their home to me, offering tea and meals, and shared their stories. They met my research interest with friendship. We connected with each other over the importance of labor and the ways that working-class people are often marginalized within their educational experiences. After I met Sally and the *FWWCP/FED*, I gained a community of friends that shaped my life and my career.

Leading the *FWWCP Archival Project* became a matter of exigence and positionality: I was the youngest one involved, able to do the physical labor necessary, as well as the one with the most resources for doing such work. But my involvement was only possible because the *FWWCP/FED* welcomed me, giving me this opportunity for collaboration. The *FWWCP Archival Project* comprises a team of *FWWCP/FED* members, librarians, students, community activists, and scholars. Together, we have curated a print and digital collection of over 2,350 working-class publications at London Metropolitan University's *Trades Union Congress Library* located in the East End where the *FWWCP* began.²

It is impossible to encompass such a large project that is still on-going after six years in the space of an article. Therefore, I will focus on specific areas that illustrate some of the larger project concerns connected to writing studies. Specifically, the *FWWCP Archival Project* can shape how our field articulates and embodies the work of creating archives within the context of precarity. For example, our methods and methodologies had to account for the realities of people involved—the laboring of bodies, fluctuating finances, physical dis/abilities, technological access, and changing social conditions that affect not only the archive's creation but also its durability. We shaped archival methods to be legible across the partnership, inclusive of community knowledge, and accessible to the *FWWCP/FED* community. In this way, the *FWWCP Archival Project* illustrates an alternative model of class-based literacy practices and collaborative archival methods drawing attention not only to texts written about precarity but also to the conditions that shape how archives emerge.

Collective working-class precarity inspired the need to preserve *FWWCP/FED* histories, but it also determines the collection's sustainability and perhaps its extinction. Therefore, I argue archival methods must be responsive to precarity, and we must work with communities to make such conditions visible within archival spaces. I will show how the *FWWCP Archival Project* responded, with what I call a kitchen-table ethos, to moments ranging from the physical mobility of members to the necessary movement of texts to a central location, in addition to technological and financial constraints. Finally, I illustrate what it meant to recirculate *FWWCP/FED* histories based on the community's expertise.

Identifying Precarity with Kitchen-Table Sponsors and University Archivists

Precarity, for this project, represents the interrelated economic, material, and spatial instability that permeates working class writers and texts, as well as the effects that often correspond with social, educational, and political marginalization in their lives. In this way, I see precarity as the unstable conditions of funding, the unpredictable nature of health and physical labor needed to sustain a community project, and the inaccessibility/exclusive nature of projects that privilege academic discourse rather than community insights. I address each of these instances of precarity in order to show how the *FWWCP Archival Project* responded to such moments by foregrounding community agency.

Within writing studies recently, precarity has developed an intensifying presence (see Hesford et al.; Daniel). Hesford et al. describe precarity as “a key concept in scholarly work devoted to the study of the affective, relational, and material conditions and structuring logics of inequality” extending from labor, war, and environmental impacts (11). These frameworks provide a lens for writing studies scholars to theorize material conditions that impact the world around us, as well as how we labor within such a space. For this project, I dwell on precarity because it created the conditions for the *FWWCP*'s existence during the 1970s and shapes its need for preservation today. Moreover, precarity manifests beyond economic instability and inadequate working conditions of *FWWCP/FED* members, resulting in social, political, cultural, and psychological ramifications that are illustrated through the lived experiences and writing of members.

During the *FWWCP*'s tenure, Britain was undergoing a radical shift in collective institutions, which was documented through *FWWCP* writing. Economist Guy Standing describes precarity that results from the “globalization era” between 1975-2008, which he connects with “commodification [that] has been extended to every aspect of life — the family, education system, firm, labour institutions, social protection policy, unemployment, disability, occupational communities and politics” (26). During this era, neoliberal principles created a means of regulation that amounted to “the attack on collective institutions,” including “trades unions” and “occupational communities” (26-7), but the *FWWCP* responded to such attacks by providing work-

ing-class people a space to reflect on the knowledges of their occupational communities, trades unions, and various forms of educational experience.

However, I also want to consider precarity for the *FWWCP Archival Project* in relation to the circulation and exchange of texts. Further, how this materiality and movement connects to, is stalled by, and challenges our sense of the economic structure of community partnership work. Within the *FWWCP Archival Project*, there was a lack of material resources, impacted by—and connected to—the members' access to education, views of literacy, transportation, health, age, funding, housing/meeting locations, and community support. This context of precarity shapes how this project has moved from boxes of potential archival material to the physical curation of a community archive. For example, our goal was to form a structure to preserve the lived experiences and materiality that shaped *FWWCP/FED* writing, resulting in the co-construction of an archive with members. Such collaborative work led me to connect discussions in community engagement (George and Mathieu; Mathieu; Parks) and the ethics involved in archival methods (Monberg), reflecting on what it means to represent precarious and embodied histories within this project.

Archival preservation necessarily includes multiple negotiations based on precarity manifesting in a community's dependence on monetary support for materials—storage space, archival boxes, labels—and staffing to collect, sort, index, box, label, shelf materials. But the selection and categorization of texts also represents a necessary means of textual and ideological privileging—a selection that typically situates archivists, librarians, or scholars as the decision-makers. These selections draw attention to the precarity of knowledge-creation among members of working-class populations, who, like Sally, have often had their views of literacy dismissed. To counter this deficit framing, we negotiated the movement of materials from vernacular home spaces—such as Sally's kitchen table—to a publicly accessible, and institutionally-run, location. For community members, choosing which texts to include, how they would be organized and indexed, was imperative. In short, our methods were shaped to privilege the *FWWCP/FED*'s knowledges, experiences, and decisions.

I see a particular need for current archival research to engage more with how to create archives *with* community members based on *their* expertise and embodied experiences, particularly people who do not have so-called “traditional” schooling experiences and are cautious of academic frameworks. Such experiences, I argue, push for the need to reinvent a methodology in the context of community literacy and working-class precarity. Following the work of Ellen Cushman (“Wampum”) and Terese Guinsatao Monberg (“Ownership”), we must continue to think through how communities shape the content and creation of archives.

At the heart of this project is the goal of inscribing a space for preserving working-class cultural identity. Such methodological practice is a deeply ideological task, involving not only the pragmatic aspects of what to gather, save, and curate but also thinking through how to avoid reproducing the marginalization felt by working-class people in the archiving process. In this way, the *FWWCP Archival Project* is an act of preservation for a culture that has often been excluded from knowledge-making conversations—a culture that must respond to such precarious framings of agency to

show their value, ability, and expertise. With the rhetorical agency to curate versions of working-class history, the *FWWCP/FED* (re)shaped the methods of the project. By recasting precarious conditions—including the location, sorting, cataloging, and financing of the archive—we can represent the embodied experiences of preservation. The materiality of the texts together represents decades of social histories, totaling thousands of documents. But the materiality of the archive also reveals transnational partnerships, shared resources and struggles, as well as an ongoing commitment to the ethos and value of such history.

In order to create such community-based and responsive methods, we relied on what I will describe as a kitchen-table ethos. As I sat at Sally Flood's kitchen table, collecting archival documents, I thought of Anne Ruggles Gere's "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurricular of Composition" and the need to engage the agency of the extracurriculum—in this case, through learning from Sally's expertise. Sally proved to me how the *FWWCP*—an extracurriculum network—functions as "a legitimate and autonomous cultural formation that undertakes its own projects" (Gere 86). With Sally, this idea became embodied through the ethos she shared about the *FWWCP* on a national, and international, scale. In its broadest sense, the *FWWCP* developed a kitchen-table ethos, appealing to a sense of community or inclusivity within a group, shared often across a kitchen table or within the vernacular spaces of home—a place of shared respect and belief that all people should be heard.

This kitchen-table ethos manifests more specifically in a shared feeling of empowerment, agency, and confidence through writing as part of a group that believes in the power of storytelling for disenfranchised people, regardless of traditional education, gender, race, nationality, or even ability to read and write. In fact, Sally noted that during meetings and performances, members could vehemently disagree with each other, and yet whenever they shared writing, everyone applauded, understanding the importance of telling your story. A kitchen-table ethos, in this case, emerges through the *FWWCP/FED*'s promotion of inclusivity, confidence, collective struggle, and love over the past four decades. This ethos also led many members to open their homes to me during my visits to England.

Indeed, this kitchen-table ethos represents the values, types of practices, and relationships that drive the *FWWCP Archival Project*. Such work opens up discussions about the embodied choices we make—choices that have consequences for what we understand as research, materials, and practices, as well as how those practices affect, enable, and sometimes stall our community partnerships. This project is the product of allowing community partnerships to change our archival—and, thus, sponsorship—practices. As Deborah Brandt notes, sponsorship—in literacy development, use, and preservation—can simultaneously become a mechanism of marginalization or a structure of support, as well as oscillate in the positions between (Brandt). Of course, there are always challenges as literacy connects to all facets of identity and has consequences, benefits, and complications on multiple levels (see Duffy et al.). Sometimes, academic institutions must undergo structural and ideological transformations that broaden the mission and values of universities (see Goldblatt and Jolliffe). The *FWWCP Archival Project* sits between these examples, calling us to redefine

the meaning of sponsorship when working *with* a particular community that largely navigates outside of universities.

So, perhaps the question might be: What did attention to precarity and a kitchen-table ethos add to our project? Within writing studies there are many examples of scholars thinking deeply about the benefits of archives, including: conducting research in connection with community literacy practices (Douglas; Schneider); understanding our embodied presence (Powell); developing methodologies and historiography (Glenn and Enoch); discussing archival methods (L'Eplattenier; Ramsey et al.); and finally considering connections to the digital humanities (Enoch; Enoch and Gold; Rawson; VanHaitsma). Embarking on the *FWWCP Archival Project* required something different though. To start, we found ourselves needing to negotiate the sponsorship of archives by quite literally constructing an archive from the ground up—without a location, finances, labor, institutional support, and more. But scholarship rarely mentions how to negotiate sponsorship between academics and individuals, organizations and institutions, working-class people and privatized education—all of which were also a negotiation across geographic borders and material barriers. For instance, many *FWWCP/FED* members do not have access to computers or mobile phones. Therefore, checking in via email is not an inclusive form of communication. In effect, there was no road map for developing an archive beginning with structural instability. But there was an exigency for preservation, which required a reflexive understanding of sponsorship centering on the community's ethos and focusing on textual materiality. Here, I will describe the *FWWCP/FED*'s ethos and then extract principles that emerged to guide our archival curation.

Part of the *FWWCP*'s ethos relied on textual materiality—the scrap poem turned xeroxed publication, for instance—and the interactions that emerged from this work. These texts move and change hands during face-to-face interactions, by cars, trains, footsteps, often among working-class friends. Enacted movements, through the exchange of texts, create much of the ethos of the archive itself. In effect, the embodied, networked relationships of people and materials/tools/texts form the base of the *FWWCP Archival Project*. Such relationships are shaped by physical labor and material resources that are particularly relevant when it comes to locating, transporting, cataloguing, and using printed archival materials; to collaboratively create such an archive also requires considerations about access, inclusion, and mobility in preservation. These considerations pushed us to be reflexive about which bodies, texts, and literacies are privileged within the archive's sponsorship structure. This focus on inclusion also meant dealing with pragmatic issues of cost, labor, and use, aiming to maintain the ethos of the community.

The materiality of texts and the networked relationships that result from the production/exchange of *FWWCP* publications resembles the “moment of reciprocity” that Paula Mathieu describes as buying/selling street newspapers but equates to much more than a monetary exchange. She notes, “the gains are far more than the physical print publication” and are often located in the human interaction of listening, conversing, and having your stories heard (26). It is a reciprocity that might even become a “network of caring relationships” (qtd. on 26). The exchanges enacted through

producing, selling, and performing *FWWCP/FED* texts represent its core—a collaborative network for writing empowerment. Using self-published books, the *FWWCP/FED* was able to sponsor their own histories through community-led circulation and production. Even more, by attempting to step out of a solely individual and capitalist model of publishing that seeks individual profit for production, the *FWWCP/FED*'s collective framework allowed access to publishing for all members. This model drew attention to labor, responded to it through a democratized process, then worked to make publishing accessible to all. In other words, they used methods accessible to the network's base, which shaped the project that now exists.

While reciprocal and collaborative methods are nothing new to community-engaged writing scholars, the *FWWCP Archival Project* shows how movement beyond university-sanctioned spaces contributes to the co-production of knowledge through the curation of archival materials by community members. As I will describe, the community determined if and how the archive would be constructed. They chose the texts. They approved the location. They chose the categories for cataloguing. Moreover, my physical dislocation from the university and entrance into *FWWCP/FED* vernacular spaces gave me access to conversations, histories, and texts that I could never have anticipated. My research was guided by the concerns, ideas, and values of members. Just as the *FWWCP/FED* illustrated how the working class can build a structure to enable their own articulation of identity, a kitchen-table ethos supports a structure that acknowledges the *FWWCP/FED* as experts and, thus, curators of their own histories.

Rebuilding Out of "Smoldering Ashes"

Too often, scholarship on archival work separates theory from material practice. In the absence of institutional support, our method grew out of precarity that has forcefully shaped our methodological decisions. Thus, I would like to detail what this meant for the enactment of the archival structure. Due to the constant movement of people and texts, there was no solidity with the *FWWCP/FED* for most of its tenure but especially when the original organization folded. At the outset, there was no central place to store the publications. Resources were scarce. Moreover, many members from the original *FWWCP* passed away before accounting for their history in any official capacity. Without money, labor, technology, and storage, the preservation of *FWWCP/FED* texts seemed bleak. As *FED* Chair Roy Birch explains:

The Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers died an untimely and painful death in 2007. The New Fed was born in 2008 from the still smoldering ashes of the Old. Lacking the social advantages of its predecessor (funding, friends, credibility, guidance and opportunity) life was never going to be easy for the new organization. [...] Survival was its main priority. (*Preserving* 8)

Birch notes that the new *FED* flailed, fearing the complete loss of the *FWWCP*'s network, including the chance to preserve the organization's textual artifacts. It was

during this time, however, that a new sponsorship structure slowly emerged involving the *FWWCP/FED*, Steve Parks, and *FWWCP* member Nick Pollard.

This new structure began with the exigency that something had to be done before the *FED* ran out of time, quite literally through the death of its founding members, and money to sustain the extremely minimized yearly festival. In 2012, I began working with Parks, Pollard, and the *FED* Executive Committee through phone and email correspondence. Together, we discussed ideas for finding a local archival space, such as a community center, or even a national organization such as the British Library. But each option came with challenges of finding resources and the appreciation for the intellectual/historical importance of the *FWWCP/FED*. I attended the 2013 *FED* Festival expecting that it might be my only time and collected archival materials from living members since the *FED* was operating with a negative yearly budget.

Yet, something different happened. It was clear that each stage of the *FWWCP/FED*'s hope for an archive reflected a shifting understanding of material conditions. This festival, and the networking moments leading up to it, brought about a series of sponsorship ideas, as well as an increase of resources and energy that created a start for the infrastructure and intellectual space to finally bring together a print archive. Here, I will describe some of the affordances and challenges that arose to shape our response.

Beginning with Community Partnerships

Personal and professional networks influenced each stage of this project, which began with a community partnership, evolving into what is now an international network. One precursor was actually what some might see as a failure. In 2011, *FWWCP* group Pecket no longer could sustain themselves and were forced to sell their residential college building purchased in 1992 (see Pauszek). Pecket was devastated. Their group, for over thirty years, had advocated for adult learners particularly with difficulties reading and writing. However, with the building's profit, they decided to preserve as much of their history as possible. And they did so with community members leading the decision-making process. Pecket hired Archive Project Director Pol Nugent, friend of Pollard, and Oral Historian Cilla Ross from London Metropolitan University to facilitate the creation of a digital archive and oral history before the group's funding ran out. Nugent, as a community organizer and Pecket participant, understood the necessity of preserving working-class adult learners' testimony. Nick Pollard was also Pecket's Archive Project Chairperson. Through these personal friendships and networks, we began discussing how Pecket's archival structure might become a model for the larger *FWWCP/FED* community. Here, we began learning what it meant to create an archive that relied on community agency as well as represented the diversity and history of the community.

From No Location to the Trades Union Congress Library

The main problem we faced was that the *FWWCP/FED* didn't have a building to sell like Pecket did or any other source of income; therefore, there was no location for this

hopeful archive. Beyond finding a location, we also needed it to be publicly accessible. After months of looking into possibilities, we couldn't find an adequate location. Then, through the previously described chain of events, Cilla Ross and Pol Nugent led us to consider London Metropolitan University's *Trades Union Congress Library (TUC)*.

Discussions surrounding access became vital in the archival formation and how we could enact an ethically responsive sponsorship structure. Because the *FWWCP/FED* fought to be heard in public spaces, there was a conscious effort to place these texts where they would be respected and actively used. The *TUC*'s ethos paired well, as it featured histories of trades unions, working-class lives, and activist materials. Quickly, the *TUC* became an exciting fit for the *FWWCP/FED* materials with the possibility of bridging academic and community interests. Moreover, London Metropolitan University was known for its distinctly working-class heritage, combined with extensive ethnic and social diversity on campus. This institutional context gave us hope that the *FWWCP/FED* texts could be integrated into courses—that is, this structure might allow working-class texts to be read by working-class students. The ultimate selling point, though, was that the *FWWCP/FED* documents could be accessed by anyone. Circulation across communities was possible with public access.

In 2014, we secured the archival space at London Metropolitan University's *TUC Library*. But the work had just begun.

Collecting Publications

We set out to physically curate, i.e., move, categorize, organize, box, and shelve, an emergent *FWWCP/FED* collection. After months of negotiation with librarian Jeff Howarth and members, the partnership was finally realized in 2014 when Nick Pollard donated over 5,000 *FWWCP/FED* documents to the *TUC*. This was a complex task for multiple reasons, including time off work/away from family, transportation costs, and the physical laboring involved to transport dozens of boxes. Pollard had to rent a van to make the journey from Sheffield to London in order to officially donate these texts. This physical act, of driving boxes between regions in England, embodies the *FWWCP/FED*'s spirit through both the materiality of the exchange and the appreciation to promote the network's circulation. Ultimately, this donation began the *FWWCP Collection*.

Dreams of curating an accessible and widely used archive were quickly met with the realities of finances and labor involving the difficulty of gathering publications scattered across England to get to London. Working-class conditions often meant transportation money was not readily available. Physical health, for many, also prevented trips. Sometimes, when we learned of a member wanting to donate texts, we were able to ship publications; yet, this involved the physical ability of packing, labeling, and carrying hundreds of pounds of materials sometimes, plus money to do so. In effect, the same difficulties Pollard faced continued for nearly every donation. Taking into account these varying abilities, the archive was a constant negotiation of im/mobility, material resources, and emotional/mental/physical labor.

Here, the methodology about inclusion and access did not account, and perhaps could not account fully, for the material circumstances of the people involved—the laboring of bodies needed to make this archive public. Interestingly, to do research connected to work and labor required me to also perform the physical work of gathering thousands of publications into boxes along with Pol Nugent, lifting dozens of boxes into cars and onto trains, and walking suitcases of material between tube stations and *FWWCP* members’ homes. Such experiences emphasize how easily we can overlook embodied labor as part of an intellectual project.

Categorizing Texts

We continued through these small moments of progress. The next stage centered on how these documents would be categorized. Most importantly, the *TUC* enabled the *FWWCP Archival Project* team to collaborate on the design so that our methods of creating the archive paralleled the kitchen-table ethos we set out to enact. As a result, the community determined how the archive would be set up through communication with the current *FED* Executive Committee, and through what seemed to be the *FED*’s final festival where we discussed the archive’s design. Since then, we have actually had yearly festivals and a two-day meeting of focus groups in 2016 to continue conversations. These were moments of active involvement from members who influenced the methods of archiving.

Ethical questions continued throughout the curation. By placing *FWWCP/FED* texts alongside labor histories, we were making an ideological argument about the collection, but we needed to develop a schema to enact this through the textual categorization. Our project involved deciding what texts would be included, how they would be sorted, as well as thinking through the metadata of the texts and how various audiences could use such information. Indeed, this often-invisible scaffolding is especially important when we are working with disenfranchised communities that have had to fight for the chance to articulate their identities. Discussing the *Digital Transgender Archive*, K.J. Rawson notes, “There are both policies and politics involved in archival selection” (6). Even more, Rawson explains, there is “rhetorical power of archival description” because these descriptions shape the language used to describe communities as well as the uptake such documents will have with future archive-users (3). Categorizing, though, is necessary for the practicality of an archive. Therefore, *FWWCP/FED* members decided how they would like these methods enacted.

In this way, the *FWWCP Archival Project* recognizes how crucial naming and description are for an archive of working-class history/bodies, leading us to prioritize members’ cataloguing structures. Members decided that all materials should be included—publications, pamphlets, minutes, funding forms, workshop proposals, correspondence, etc. While we wanted to curate for usability, we also wanted to be reflective about the hierarchical power structures embedded in such cataloguing. For example, labeling a text with a description of “women’s writing” or “immigrant writers” already marks this writing and distinguishes it from “working-class writing,” or the main goal of the *FWWCP/FED*. Moreover, these labels—while used by the writers themselves—mean different things for each person. Therefore, we attempted to use

the phrasing, words, and descriptions that came from the writers, if still alive, or their publications directly when possible. Representatives from the FED Executive Committee guided these decisions.

Discussions about sorting began with the idea of using individual authors, time periods, and themes, but the *FWWCP/FED* soon decided that it was important to illustrate a sense of regional participation. The group wanted the archive to show how geographic location affected working-class people, perhaps through use of dialect, types of vocation, food, culture, or regional events. For instance, Yorkshire writing groups represented the work of coal miners, while more coastal areas represented docklands work. Ultimately, this pushed us to rely on regional categories to sort the texts, such as: Northwest; Northeast; Yorkshire; East Midlands; West Midlands; Southeast; Southwest; London; Scotland; Wales; Northern Ireland; Europe; and other international texts: Canada, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.

We have been committed to a community-minded, reflective, and participatory approach to archival creation in each choice. For instance, to begin the physical work of sorting, *FWWCP/FED* members started this undertaking. This method relies on the community to begin and refine the curation work of their own embodied histories. However, providing the labor necessary to complete this work was impossible for members. Therefore, a major part of this sorting was accomplished through my own labor and that of American students taking a study abroad Civic Writing - London course developed by Steve Parks and myself at Syracuse University, taught in summers 2015, 2016, and 2018. By May 2015, roughly 1,800 publications were sorted into regions with *FWWCP/FED* advice and leadership. These regions were further sorted by writing groups or individual authors, date, and more. This process required going through stacks of paperwork, including membership applications, meeting minutes, correspondence, funding requests, applications, and more. Together these administrative documents represent four decades worth of social interaction, community organizing, and collective publishing that served as the foundation for the *FWWCP/FED*'s transnational network. These documents also narrate a story of how the *FWWCP/FED* evolved, the challenges they faced, and how they were able to advocate for themselves.

The final step of this initial categorization revolved around the need for accessibility and use for subsequent users. *FWWCP/FED* members determined that the archive would need to include the following categories: region, title, author, publisher, date, type/genre, and themes. Themes, they decided, should include: *gender, race, sexuality, mental health, migration, conflict, education, literacy, community, class, domestic/personal, and activism*. Although these categories intersect, the goal was to represent the multifaceted layering of these texts and their emergent networks.





Images of *FWWCP* texts being sorted.

Through our partnership, the very people who lived the history focused the vision of the archive. We attempted to enact the *FWWCP/FED*'s collective decision-making, as well as destabilize the authority of university partners to suit the needs, requests, and hopes of the community. Each choice was about promoting access and inclusion through preservation. These processes also meant choices were revised so that our methods/methodologies considered the precarious realities involved. This wasn't always easy, but it does show how archival work is rhetorical, how our methods can be expanded and must be challenged, and how the work of methodology relates not only to ideological consequences but also to embodied precarity.

Finding Members, Maintaining Ethics

Beyond the physical relocation of texts, we also had to deal with the ethical/material dilemmas of copyright, intellectual property, and fair use. Our long-term goal involved creating a dual print archive in the United States and a digital collection—a choice that could hopefully increase the durability and circulation of histories across audiences. Yet, individual authors often maintain copyright, causing issues with establishing print and digital archives. Other authors had moved, died, or had not thought about this work in digital environments or in a library. Although many members privately began archiving years earlier, they could not predict the re-curation of their materials. These are ongoing struggles as we cannot possibly contact the thousands of members whose work is part of the *FWWCP Collection*.

Still, we strategized how we might reach out to former members unable to attend our focus groups and *FED* Festivals, utilizing multiple forms of outreach including email, phone, letters, and social media, the most successful of which was contacting a

main group from the FED Executive Committee and following individual leads. It has taken years to track down members. However, because of his ethos as longtime editor of *Federation Magazine*, once Nick Pollard made the primary donation to the *TUC*, other members contacted us about donating their work. For those who were aging and had few copies, if not only one of these texts, their donations embodied a strong belief in the preservation of these rare, personal histories. Sally Flood, for instance, gave me copies of her publications to bring to the *TUC*. In effect, finding members, acquiring rare publications, and figuring out ethical means of such work is imbued with precarity of time, of resources, and of the reality of a group of members mostly aged seventy to ninety years. But these are the embodied moments brought to life in the archive's creation.

The personal ethos and exigency of the archive sinks in when family/friends of members email me after finding information about the *FWWCP Collection* online. Multiple emails express how excited people are to connect—either physically going to the *TUC* or through a digitized copy on the in-progress digital collection (see *FWWCP Digital Collection*)—with writing they thought was lost or never knew existed. Imagine finding out that your deceased grandmother was part of a writing group and you can now read her stories. Circulating these often-unknown histories through the *FWWCP Archival Project* now enables finding, reconnecting, remembering.

Public Accessibility

A simultaneously confusing question was how we might create publics that would allow for increased circulation of *FWWCP/FED* texts. When I first went to England, I picked up two suitcases and carry-on bags full of duplicate books in West Yorkshire from Nick Pollard. I transported them with the help of Pol Nugent via car, train to London, and then by plane to Syracuse, New York. That is, I transported over 125 lbs. of books across the Atlantic Ocean—something that, while desired by the *FWWCP/FED*, still felt disconcerting. We have continued to transport books through suitcases and, very hesitantly, through the mail because the desire for creating accessible publics for the texts remains the *FWWCP/FED*'s priority.

Moving publications was only possible because of the kitchen-table ethos that the *FWWCP/FED* maintained as a transnational organization. At the height of its membership before the digital age, the network spanned four continents: members from South Africa would correspond with British members via mail; members from France and Italy would come to England for the Festivals; and members from Australia, the United States, and Canada would share their publications. The *FED* expressed their desire to represent this transnational history, *as long as it would also be used and circulated*; therefore, we wanted to physically circulate these texts across geographic borders. Such circulation has emerged through the teaching of *FWWCP/FED* materials at Syracuse University and through the Civic Writing - London course, London Metropolitan University, University of Akron, and Long Island University - Brooklyn.

Navigating Finances

Funding was—and still is—a constant source of precarity. To interview members, attend the FED Festival, and transport books, I applied for and obtained various grants between \$300 - \$1,000. We also secured a CCCC Research Initiative grant (\$9,460) to conduct focus groups in London. The *FWWCP/FED* often provided resources in the form of housing, transportation, and food when possible to help alleviate expenses. Additionally, the Civic Writing London course paid a majority of transportation and housing costs each summer. Grants based on pedagogical and labor work are central in allowing this project to continue. In 2017, I received a CCCC Emergent Researcher grant to focus on the digital portion of the archive. However, grants often pose bureaucratic issues with collaborations across countries. Moreover, I have applied for eight different fellowships and research grants that resulted in rejections. Without financial assets within the *FWWCP/FED*, we rely heavily on academic funding, which is inconsistent, time-consuming, and dependent upon success; otherwise, this work is largely rendered as invisible labor. Grants also pose a contradiction— a university sanctioned funding source is the only way this community literacy project could continue. That is, while it is necessary for the community to shape the archive at every stage, they cannot financially sustain it. And these contradictions continue because materiality in the form of finances, texts, and labor continues to affect this project.

Throughout, I have described the material conditions shaping this project, but two main points have determined its continuation: community support/sponsorship and funding. Community support cannot be quantified—the kitchen-table ethos or sense of community values. Without this sense of community, of Sally inviting me to her home, members giving me a place to stay, of decade long collaborations, this project does not work. Partnered with this somewhat ephemeral notion of community, there is also the very real materiality of finances. Based on financial materiality, the project doesn't really have a happy ending. The precarity that sparked its creation is an ongoing concern.

Last year, the *TUC Library* moved locations in a restructuring effort by London Metropolitan University. The *FWWCP Collection* went with it, thankfully, but the staff has decreased, the library's hours have diminished, and there are few resources or people to develop the collection. Finally, London Metropolitan University campuses are at risk of shutting down, with 2016 prompting over four hundred faculty/staffing cuts and the shrinking of two of its campuses (Pells). Fear of closure continues today. That is, while the kitchen-table ethos of this project has created a forceful community, it has not yet combatted the structural precarity behind this archival effort.

The Precarious Archivist

So what does it mean to do community-based archival work that begins from a context of precarity? I argue community-based archival projects need to be responsive to precarity and representative of the community's ethos, especially when this ethos is cultivated in vernacular spaces. As noted, we didn't solve every issue of structural precarity, but this movement and relearning is representative of the type of precarity

that I am calling us to archive and make visible. In this story, the *FWWCP Collection* emerges because of working-class precarity—but this story also details how Sally becomes a precarious archivist herself and how she has informed my thinking on community partnerships. Sally’s story is an example of how the movement of her texts speaks to the powerful circulation of working-class voices, in effect flipping the script to show how the *FWWCP/FED* functions as teachers, experts, and self-curators. This storytelling is a significant knowledge-making and embodied practice—a moment when Sally curates and defines the history she wants preserved.

The re-curation of Sally’s story—and the *FWWCP/FED*—is imbued with issues of precarity in all stages, moving from the sponsorship of an archive to naming, cataloging texts, circulation, and its possible demise. Recasting archival projects in this way represents a form of sponsorship that privileges community needs. Terese Monberg describes archives as “a living publication that resists closure and is always open to re/vision” (40). The *FWWCP Archival Project* shows an example of how we can continue to practice such revision within our disciplinary methods. Monberg notes, “The archives allow the community to ... determine what is worthy of archiving, researching, and circulating” (40). Beginning with *FWWCP/FED* community histories, knowledges, and desires shaped the ways that the archive came into being.

Let’s consider what Sally shared. Born in 1925, Sally grew up in working-class East London, the daughter of a Russian-Jewish immigrant father who was a cabinet-maker. As a child, she was evacuated from London during bombings in World War II. When she returned, Sally thought she might take classes to become a teacher, but her mother decided against it, telling her to become a machinist. Sally left school at fourteen and was, indeed, a machinist for most of her life. She was drawn to writing, but never had an outlet to share her work. Throughout her life, Sally had to negotiate her identity as a working-class, Jewish, female; in many ways, identity markers—accent, ethnicity, class, and gender—negatively positioned Sally in regard to her literacy skills. These identities and the marginalization she felt became integral to her writing.

Although Sally didn’t always have a public outlet for writing, this changed drastically in 1971 when she learned of the Stepney School strike, a strike led by six hundred students, ages eleven to fourteen, who protested in Trafalgar Square to advocate for their teacher Chris Searle. Searle had been “sacked” for prompting his students to publish poems about their lives, including poverty, loss, and struggle. Watching this news unfold, Sally’s own writing suddenly took on new meaning (“Mount”). As we sat at her kitchen table, Sally pulled out *Stepney Words*, the book of poetry written by the youth who went on strike. She showed me newspaper clippings and reflected on why she believed Searle was fired: “They didn’t want to give the children a voice, actually! That was the truth of it!” (“Mount”). She felt proud of these East End kids standing up for what they wanted. Sally also described the flyer advertising the writing group started by Chris Searle that she had joined: “I didn’t think I could write, until I joined the *Basement Writers*... We still keep in touch forty years later” (“FED Festival”). Through this collaboration, the *Basement Writers* became one of the eight founding *FWWCP* groups, which provided Sally a space to contribute to a writing community.

Sally spoke of the power of community publishing and how proud she was to be part of the *FWWCP* from its beginning:

Ah, it changed my life, actually...I sent [the *Basement Writers*] a poem and I couldn't believe it. They published it, and they asked me to join 'em. And that really changed my life. Yeah, because once I became part of the group, it was fantastic. I ended up reading at the Festival Hall and the Globe, places I would've never dreamt of before. So... the [*FWWCP*] has definitely changed my life. And I'm still part of them. ("FED Festival")

Here, Sally references the *FWWCP* as a welcoming collective that shaped her later experiences of work and writing. This community gave her access to new public rhetorical spaces. Rather than ripping up her poems like before, Sally found a community and growing audience to support her voice, even when political and laboring structures diminished her class.

Regarding this socially charged environment, Sally recounted how the writing of the "poorer districts" was undervalued: "Most of our *FWWCP* writers come from poorer districts and they can tell a very different story...When we first started writing, they told us that it wasn't literacy. Because it was coming from *the wrong class*. And we proved them wrong" ("Mount", emphasis mine). To further explain this friction, Sally recounted that when the *FWWCP* requested Arts Council funding, they were emphatically told that their organization had "no solid literary merit." Within Sally's history, the interplay of governmental power, as well as social/economic influence, deeply impact perceptions of literacy. In her stories, institutions and individuals/groups often position the working-class as lacking intellectually. However, as she recounts, school children's agency challenged these conversations and then provoked a response that eventually grew into the *FWWCP/FED*—a response dedicated to developing social awareness of class struggles at the local level, producing change with inclusive writing/publishing practices, and advocating that working-class people produce writing that matters.

If we read Sally's poems about the "exploited" working-class and "down at heel workers" alongside her descriptions of writing "from the wrong class," we see that her story is an expression of the physical, mental, and financial hardships felt from a perilous class existence. The tearing up of Sally's poems becomes a metaphor for the ephemerality of working-class voices unknown. What, then, does it mean not only to listen to but also to archive these stories? Together, these texts epitomize the lived experience of the *FWWCP/FED* and shape the values brought into preservation. These values draw attention to how communities respond to precarious conditions that often erode such working-class history rather than promote it.

The *FWWCP Archival Project* shows us how stories like Sally's might travel—from a poem on scrap paper written in a factory decades ago to her kitchen table to a transnational community archive. Sally published her poems to be sold for fifty pence at various community spaces—publications that became part of the *FWWCP Collection*. Over the decades, Sally performed her readings, gave interviews, and even taught reminiscence writing—work that, interestingly, allowed her to quit her factory

job. Through the *FWWCP Archival Project*, we indexed these texts on a spreadsheet, identified themes, publication dates, genres of writing (see Pauszek and Portillo; Portillo and Pauszek). Then, we re-boxed them into eighty-five archival boxes, documenting the contents so they could be searchable. This process shows Sally's story was embedded within a network that made precarity visible and responded to it collaboratively, privileging the *FWWCP/FED* as knowledge-makers.

Conclusion

Ultimately, what we learned from the *FWWCP Archival Project* that has ramifications for writing studies is that our methods have to be malleable enough to account for the literacy practices embodied by the communities we engage. One of the greatest assets of the *FWWCP Archival Project* is the development of a kitchen-table ethos, or the culture in which stories like Sally's emerged initially with groups meeting to share their work; and, for me, sitting at Sally's kitchen table, hearing her stories, and seeing the documents that she curated for me. The shared practice of this ethos shaped my research methods/methodologies to take into account how community members curate their own histories and acknowledge the material conditions surrounding their lives.

As we do community-based archival work, attending to the materiality of finances and the labor of physical bodies pushes us to enact methods that are ethically responsive to community members wanting to speak back against their marginalization. Such work manifests not only in how we theorize projects but also through the ideological-turned-material choices of collection, design, finance, naming, and circulation. It is this work that can remind Sally Flood and others who identify with her that their writing is not just scraps of paper. Writing from "the wrong class" might very well bring together a powerful collective that builds a forty-year transnational community partnership.

Notes

1. FWWCP refers to the pre-2007 organization, with FWWCP/FED referring to both.
2. FWWCP Archival Project describes the collection of artifacts, interviews, and the processes involved in our partnership, but the archive itself is called the FWWCP Collection.

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