

# A Prison Story: Public Rhetoric, Community Writing, and the Politics of Gender<sup>1</sup>

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*This article enacts the transgenre resources of the personal academic essay to examine the politics of gender and questions of privilege across academic and public spheres. The author interweaves prose, poetry, criticism, and argument to interrogate the practice of transcultural citizenship and the transdisciplinary project of Writing Across Communities.*

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## DESPAIR

Crumpled newspaper, the bags he carries, the  
clothes he wears.

Stiff as an old woman's knees, shambling  
through security,  
scanning the boarding gate. A trembling  
animal in a crate,  
caged, frightened, he searches for the exit.

There are no quaint messages to send, no  
Christmas newsletters,  
no charming receptions, no cut-glass bowls,  
no yellow paper napkins,  
no proper etiquette, only this brittle young  
man on my arm,  
silent, the thread of spittle is a pearl on his lip.

No longer an infant in a clear, plastic incubator, jaundiced  
and bawling, no longer the toe-headed child, deep and soulful,  
no longer the college boy I waved off to Chile, with ski poles,  
two volumes of Neruda, my dictionary, a year's supply of lithium.

Shell-shocked, panicked, he reaches across the aisle,  
"I'm sorry, Mom. Please take me home."

This essay grows out of a story. It is offered in response to the urging of the participants in my Community Writing Conference workshop, "Citizens Scholars and the Cultural Rhetorical Ecology of Writing Across Communities," in Boulder, Colorado on October 15, 2015.<sup>2</sup> During this workshop, we engaged six dimensions of institutional culture as generative themes or *topoi* for cultivating cultural ecologies of writing (Appendix A). Invoking an alliterative laundry list of talking points I coined in terms of *Principles; Privilege; Partnerships; Populations (People & Places); Pedagogies & Practices; Programs and Projects*, I presented a series of inductive moments to map the development of the University of New Mexico Writing Across Communities initiative (Gallegos). Through cross-talk with the twenty-five workshop participants around these six *topoi*, the initial purpose of the workshop was framed as helping emergent leaders build engaged infrastructure for community writing in their home institutions. Toward these purposes, I argued that implementing Writing Across Communities as a hermeneutic project that cuts across disciplinary, institutional, and intellectual boundaries, can help to efficaciously enact both deliberative democratic practice and the transformational possibilities of agonistic pluralism toward the inclusion of historically underrepresented populations in the work of community writing across academic, public, and professional spheres.

But in the process of telling the origin story of Writing Across Communities, I confessed to my workshop participants that the reasons that I maintain my commitment to the work of Writing Across Communities remain embedded in a personal narrative. I have looked to poetry more often than to prose to describe the ineffable experience of losing my child to mental illness and the prison system.



*NCWAC 2012 Summit Group*

I first publicly recounted the catalyzing moment of becoming an advocate of community writing in the climate of radical intimacy at the 2012 Summit of the National Consortium of Writing Across Communities (NCWAC) in Santa Fe, New Mexico on July 15, 2012 (Writing Across Communities Resource Site). In the rustic, wood-plank banquet room of the Cowgirl BarBQ on Guadalupe Street in historic Santa Fe, the city of “blessed faith,” a group of thirty junior and senior scholars from across the nation deliberated together for three days about the role of community writing in the field of Composition Studies.

Three years lapsed between the first telling and the re-telling of this story at the workshop for University of Colorado, Boulder Conference on Community Writing on that early October 15, 2015 morning. The black, mentally ill homeless woman pushing her shopping cart across the UC Boulder campus at 7:30 a.m. as I parked my car moved me to speak. The only other person of color I would meet over the next few days on campus or around Boulder was the young black man from Jamaica, a custodian and international work study student,



*Homeless Woman at UC Boulder Community Writing Conference*

who was taping electrical cords to the floor of my conference room. I invited him to join our workshop, which he enthusiastically did, still dressed in his janitorial uniform sitting among us predominantly white academics. His presence demanded an equally authentic and vulnerable act as the guest to his campus. So I took the risk of self-disclosure. Meanwhile, over the three years since I first told my story, the conversations changed, the actors transformed, and the narrative kept evolving while the issues, the *topoi*, the places where my arguments for the hermeneutic project called “Writing Across Communities.” rested in silence—living and breathing at the heart of a prison story.

As scholar, teacher, and educational advocate, I am interested in the writing lives of students beyond the classroom. The transcultural, translingual, and transnational universe in which our students live and write in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, finds expression through polyvocalic, shape-shifting rhetorics and *trans-genred* discourses. There are no stable texts. The language and literacy practices of vulnerable communities and ethnolinguistically diverse populations represent the primary

sphere of concern for which Writing Across Communities as an advocacy project has been directly engaged (politically, rhetorically, pedagogically, and theoretically) since 2004.

In February 2004 during my job talk at UNM, I offered this proposal: “Our classrooms have been think tanks for science and industry for decades. What might our classrooms look like if we cultivated think tanks for citizenship?” Writing Across Communities at UNM became part of that answer. Deploying the military term of the “think tank” was not a purely serendipitous metaphor. The long standing alignment of UNM with Los Alamos and Sandia Laboratories in New Mexico called for, in my mind, an educational counter-discourse in the cultivation of citizens and scholars. The UNM Department of English Professional Writing Program had strong historical ties to Sandia Laboratories. I simply wondered aloud if we might cultivate other community alignments not engaged in the business of making nuclear arsenal.

The conversation for Writing Across Communities (WACommunities) began in earnest at UNM during my first semester as an assistant professor in the Fall 2004, in my graduate-level practicum, ENGL 537 and my undergraduate advanced expository writing course ENGL 320, Writing Across Academic and Public Cultures. I adopted the organic term of “cultural ecologies of writing” as the conceptual metaphor for Writing Across Communities to begin to seed a local counter-discourse. The strategic use of this organic conceptualization system and organizing model, manifested itself over time in the multiple generative ways that WACommunities took root locally and nationally for the next decade. On a campus visit to UNM in 2009, Linda Adler Kassner described us as growing ivy. During a guest lecture at UNM, Juan Guerra, two years later, depicted the Writing Across Communities project as rhizomatic, a deep network below the surface of earth emanating from a single root system. Cultivating a project identity, a shapeshifting ethos resilient and responsive enough to endure the vicissitudes of a volatile decade of mobilization and institutionalization, represents one of the greatest strengths of WACommunities.

A growing constellation of stakeholders and scholars has since traced this local, national, and transnational conversation in a number of books and journal articles (Writing Across Communities Workshop Working Papers Resources). Several of these WACommunities scholarly articles have been anthologized. One received a national journal award. The forthcoming Oxford University Press TESOL Encyclopedia will include an entry for “Writing Across Communities.” Trust me, there was no blueprint for any of this. The inauspicious beginning of the national WACommunities conversation happened at a 2005 CCCC panel presentation in San Francisco in the basement of an old convention hall contemplating the possibilities of what I audaciously proposed as “Writing Across Communities” with a handful of participants. It was a moment without apparent consequence.

The synchrony of the moment, however, was more efficacious for the field of Composition Studies than I realized. It was in this time and place that same year that Michael Moore and John Warnick launched the *Journal of Community Literacy*. WACommunities as a construct and a emergent advocacy movement indexed a change in progress, a paradigm shift, a political turn in the field first articulated by Steve Parks and Eli Goldblatt in their 2000 *College English* article, “Writing Beyond the Curriculum: Fostering New Collaborations in Literacy.” Four years after that uneventful presentation positing the invention of the UNM Writing Across Communities project, I presented a paper once again extolling the need for a new model of community-based writing across the curriculum at the 2009 CCCC, also hosted in San Francisco. It was an occasion when the political became personal for me, the personal become political, and professional turn of our field brought me from the CCCC convention hall to the prison cell.

## **POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND TRANS-GENRED REALITIES**

The phone call came as I sat in the 2009 CCCC convention ballroom in San Francisco listening to Mike Rose’s featured speaker presentation on working class academics. I remember thinking to myself before my cell phone rang, “Why do so few women academics tell their stories?” While the list of masculine narratives of academic life abound, I still remain hard pressed to list an equal number of feminine narratives. Elaine Richardson’s *PHD to Ph.D: How Education Saved My Life* and

Nancy Welch's *Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World* are among the few to come to mind. Issues of authority and gender seem to constrain the act of *trans-gendered* writing among women academics. And I am beginning to understand why. I silenced my cell phone as I left the ballroom to take the call from the chaplain of the Monterey County Jail. My son Jacob, incarcerated and suffering from bipolar disorder, was on suicide watch. The chaplain asked me to come. I stood stunned and alone. My son had disappeared more than three years before this moment, living among the homeless on unknown streets, resurfacing, and disappearing again. I had searched for him in every street, in every city I traveled—unconsciously and consciously calling his name wherever the professional conference circuit took me.

I found my way to the hotel concierge desk. There are things a mother imagines she will do for a child. I had done them all: the piano lessons, the band concerts, the soccer games, the commencement ceremonies, the celebrations, the comings-and-goings of youth. This was not one of those things. I simply could not bear the thought of seeing my son. With the help of a beautiful young woman named Beatriz at the concierge's desk at San Francisco Marriott, I made the journey to the Monterey County Jail to claim the shell of the young man that was my son. Uncertain if I should make the trip after the chaplain informed me that Jacob had refused all visitors for the past few months, Beatriz told me, "Go. The guards will call his name and tell him that his mother is there for him. I was an inmate at the Monterey County Jail myself. A stupid mistake. A DUI. I was too afraid and ashamed to tell my family where I was. And I waited until my mother came and called my name, 'Beatriz, *mi'ja!*' *Por eso* you must go." And so with the help and guidance of Beatriz, a bright angel, who reserved for me the last rental car available on St. Patrick's Day weekend in San Francisco and located the prison unit and the visiting hour schedule for the Monterey County Jail, I found Jacob.

## DEATH OF A SON

To the woman in the social office who dismissed the felony charges for the bottle of water he stole from her purse.

To the officer who found him in a gutter howling,  
a coyote to the L.A. moon.

To the truck driver  
who saw him walking down the side of a freeway,  
a somnambulist without shoes.

To the nurse  
in the Colorado psych unit  
who tried to find his mother.

To the medics who wrapped him tightly,  
carried him from home, thank you.  
Final snapshot of a son.

In *Tragic Sense of Life*, philosopher Miguel de Unamuno contends: “Consciousness (*conscientia*) is participated knowledge, is co-feeling, and co-feeling is com-passion. Love personalizes all that it loves. Only by personalizing it can we fall in love with an idea” (120).

The idea of “Writing Across Communities” took form over the course of a ten-year trajectory around a set of principles, a hermeneutic project that has lived and grown on the margins of the academy—a counter-discourse to the neoliberal rhetoric of education as property. As the university emptied out our classrooms and the field of Composition Studies dis-embodied the teaching of writing into the digital sphere, WACommunities pressed us as students, community members, and faculty into closer contact with one another. Falling in love with the idea of Writing Across Communities for me coincided with the emergence of consciousness. As Miguel de Unamuno asserts consciousness “is only reached through an act of collision, through suffering more or less severe, through the sense of one’s own limits” (120).

WACommunities is and remains an act of imaginative fiction—the kind of Midrash or emergence narrative pressing against the limits of the legal imagination of the academy. In the *Abraham*



*Joshua Heschel: Essential Writings*, this evocative Jewish theologian writes of radical amazement. Heschel contends that the “greatest hindrance to knowledge is our adjustment to conventional notions, to mental clichés” (58). “Wonder,” Heschel writes, “goes beyond knowledge” (59). Spiritually and intellectually “we cannot live by merely reiterating borrowed or inherited knowledge” (59). As an intellectual project, WACommunities resonates with the emergent consciousness that my dear friend and colleague Chuck Schuster so graciously indulged some twenty years ago with the publication of *Attending to the Margin: Writing, Researching, and Teaching on the Front Lines* (1999) and *Latino/a Discourses: On Language, Identity, and Literacy Education* (2004). For reasons both personal and professional, I have been writing and teaching from places that Victor Villanueva once termed “Edge City” for more than two decades, irrepressibly moved to engage the counter-narratives of the field (Villanueva). These marginal tendencies, however, are more than a romantic fascination or fetishizing of difference. These are *trans-gendered* realities.

The term WACommunities denotes a principled and systemic institutional response to linguistic imperialism in K-16 literacy education across and beyond the disciplines informing curriculum development, administrative advocacy, assessment, research, and extra-institutional initiatives in support of ethnolinguistic minority populations (Kells “Linguistic Contacts” and Kells, Ballester, Villanueva “Latino/a Discourses”).

WAC as a construct is simply too narrow for the work we need to be doing on behalf of historically underserved writers. However, Community Writing as a recently termed subfield is no more capacious in my mind. “Community Writing” as a cover term is an overly neutral construct, de-politicized container, an empty trope, and a vague conceptual metaphor. Searching for a robust conceptual umbrella to describe this work remains a thorny question for those of us in the field. My criticism of “Community Writing” as a subfield echoes my critique of traditional WAC: both subfields privilege white, English-speaking academics voyeuristically engaging curricular genre and discourses in and beyond elite universities.

First, all writing is community writing. All writing—academic, professional, civic writing—is cultural and community-based. Every discipline and every institution is saturated with culture and constituted as a polyglot discourse community. Secondly, “community writing” is a noun, passive, fixed, product-centered. Finally, “community writing” situates writers outside of spaces of institutional power. In my experience tackling the prison industrial complex and mental health system on behalf of my son, helping marginalized citizens to situate themselves *insides spaces of institutional power* in order to rewrite their lives, is the only way to help them access the resources for social wellbeing and civic participation.

So what are we really talking about when we talk about “Community Writing” and the public turn in Composition Studies toward writing beyond the curriculum? Are we talking about the (uneven) exercise, circulation, and concentration of privilege, power, and position across writing communities within and beyond academic institutional structures? Are we talking about a resistance movement away from our fetishized pre-occupation with first year college writers and curricular-based writing? Are we talking about the need for the field of Composition Studies to step away from our over-determined focus on entry-level college writers as the be-all-and-end-all of college literacy education? Are we trying to climb out of our own occupational neurosis as Compositionist, move beyond the classroom, and engage the writing lives of students and their communities of belonging in more meaningful ways?

WACommunities, in contrast, represents a free-floating gerund form of the verb “to write;” it is active, and process-centered. WACommunities promotes critical pedagogies and practices across a spectrum of discourse communities (academic, civic, and professional) using writing to learn as well as writing for engagement practices. WACommunities is political, seeking to align and coordinate institutional resources toward enhancing transcultural citizenship and cultivating rhetorical agency among historically excluded groups through writing practices across students’ multiple spheres of belonging (Guerra, “Enacting Institutional Change” and “Language, Culture, Identity, and Citizenship”; Zawacki and Cox).

This initiative has functioned as an intellectual commonwealth, nationally and internationally, circulating WACommunities principles and practices to other sites and institutions for more than ten years. There are no trademarks or copyrights. Of note, Baltimore Community College recently adopted the WACommunities construct as did Broward College System QEP. WACommunities programs (curricular, administrative, cross-institutional and extra-institutional) seek to extend writing support for ethnolinguistically diverse and other vulnerable populations vertically and horizontally throughout the entire process of literacy education in and beyond the curriculum. Site-specific applications of WACommunities approaches expand the limits of traditional WAC/WID models by integrating WACommunities principles and practices into traditional institutional structures.

Writing Across Communities evolved in the disturbance ecology of my own institution at the UNM, surviving the turbulence of four different presidential regimes, the unrelenting chaos in my own Department of English, alongside the devastating global economic shifts of the Great Recession. WACommunities is all about process—deliberative, generative, disruptive, and restorative processes. I have extolled the successes and celebrated the possibilities of Writing Across Communities in nearly a dozen conference presentations and an equal number of articles. But I won't be writing about these outcomes in this article. Instead, I want to talk about the dissonances, the shadow ecology of doing "WAC with a difference."

## **WRITING IN AND THROUGH DISTURBANCE ECOLOGIES**

The phone call came at 7:30 a.m. on the morning of March 10, 2010. Chuck Paine, my friend and colleague at UNM. Our colleague, Hector Torres, and his lover, Stefania Gray, a UNM graduate student in our program, had been stalked and murdered by her jealous ex-husband. The department grappled with the trauma and the aftermath of this violence over the next year. Faculty retired and moved away. Consequently, the UNM Rhetoric and Writing Program was reduced to two tenured faculty members: Chuck Paine and myself, the lone survivors.

Meanwhile, my own son remained incarcerated at Monterrey County Jail, psychotic and in a solitary confinement—deemed incompetent to stand trial for stealing a vegetable truck, casting heads of lettuce in his wake across a California highway from Salinas to Gilroy, the Garlic Capital of the world. Trauma and violence creates a rupture that community seeks to fill.

In the wake of these losses, several faculty members in the Department of English organized a UNM symposium on Domestic Violence to honor our fallen colleagues in September 2010. The following year, UNM graduate student, Brian Hendrickson, and the Writing Across Communities graduate-student governed WAC Alliance, coordinated the 2011 UNM Civil Rights Symposium on Mental Health and Social Justice. Transformation emerges out of death in uneven and unpredictable ways.



*Ofrenda Table in Honor of Hector Torres and Stefania Gray*

## GRIEF

The anguish of loving falls  
like grit into a perfect cup of tea,  
children born and lost in the slow decay  
of living, we write  
new poems, make  
desert from ash, stirring  
dreams out of the piñon-scorched morning  
on this blue-snow mesa.

In *The Power of Identity*, Manuel Castells elegantly theorizes the forms of institutional cycles of identity-building as conditioned by social power. Castells argues that the “construction of identities uses building material from history, from geography, from biology, from productive and reproductive institutions, from collective memory, and from personal fantasies, from power apparatuses, and religious revelations” (7). In brief, institutions and individuals draw upon these ideological building materials consciously and unconsciously. The theory works as an explanatory tool for understanding the process of identity formation of WACommunities as well. Castells offers three models to describe and identify these building formations: *legitimizing identity* (advanced by dominant institutional discourses); *resistance identity* (introduced by the counter-discourses of devalued and/or stigmatized groups); *project identity* (promoted toward new identity formations in order to redefine the social position of historically excluded groups).

Over the course of the next decade, WACommunities migrated across all three of Castells’ identity formations, reinventing itself through legitimizing institutional discourses, engaging resistance counter-discourses, and enacting project identities constellated through alternative discourse formations. The opportunity to interrogate these identity formation processes with other Community Writing, advocates inspired my decision to host the first summit of the loosely organized National Consortium of Writing Across Communities (NCWAC). Declaring the need for the formation of NCWAC in October 2010 during an invited speaker presentation at Auburn

University, I proposed with WAC director Margaret Marshall, hosting the first NCWAC Summit in July 2012 in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Drafting the work-in-progress vision statement of the National Consortium of Writing Across Communities signaled a move toward adopting a legitimizing identity by building alignments with other subfields across the national professional organization of CCC. The NCWAC vision statement emerged out of the conversation with a number of stakeholders and was drafted at Mary Mac's Tea Room in Atlanta during CCCC 2011. Seeking out this historically significant space, a safety zone for activists of the 1960s African American civil rights movement, my colleagues and I joined in conversation about the formation of NCWAC. This intimate and diverse cadre of community-engagement folks included Jackie Jones Royster, Juan Guerra, Steve Parks, Eli Goldblatt, Tiffany Rousculp, and Kevin Roozen. The following working statement ultimately set the terms and the agenda for the 2012 NCWAC Summit that convened more than a year later in July 2012, coinciding with the International Folk Art Festival in Santa Fe. The NCWAC vision statement reads:

The National Consortium of Writing Across Communities represents a constellation of stakeholders locally and nationally centered around educational principles and cultural practices that promote the generative (creative and life-sustaining) ecological relationships of language and literacy to the maintenance and wellbeing of human communities. The NCWAC seeks to guide curriculum development, stimulate resource-sharing, support multi-modal approaches to community arts, cultivate networking, and promote research in language practices and literacy education throughout the nation to support local colleges and universities working to serve the vulnerable communities within their spheres of influence. (Kells, *Writing Communities Newsletter* 2011 and 2012; *Writing Across Communities Workshop*)

Invitations to scholars across subfields in WPA, WAC, Second Language Writing, Writing Centers, Community Writing, Basic Writing, and Service Learning/Civic Engagement followed. We reached out to graduate students and faculty at every corner of the

nation, seeking a racially, ethnolinguistically, institutionally, and regionally diverse cohort of NCWAC Summit participants. We invited participants to deliver a five-minute position statement as a springboard for deliberation. The goals and objectives of the 2012 NCWAC Summit included the following action items:

The five-minute position papers should respond in some way to the objectives for the Summit and/or the overarching goals of the Consortium. The objectives are as follows:

Constitute the NCWAC vision/mission (goals/objectives) statement; Articulate and define the NCWAC organizational structure; Draft the NCWAC Intellectual statement with professional guidelines for scholars of community literacy and their institutions; Establish the terms/benefits of NCWAC membership as well as a plan for developing a membership directory; Develop a plan for implementing the NCWAC resource website.

Guiding our achievement of the above objectives should be a consideration of the overarching goals of the Consortium to: Promote deliberative democratic practice in the public sphere and community literacy projects; Advocate for culturally-relevant, linguistically-informed approaches to literacy education for historically-underserved student populations; Promote curriculum development for Writing Across Communities approaches to First Year Writing, WAC programs, Writing Centers, etc.; Mentor graduate students and junior faculty (graduate school through tenure) so as to make it safe and feasible for them to do the scholarly work of community literacy; Promote resource-sharing and collaborative scholarly projects between faculty and graduate students across institutions. (Writing Communities and Writing Across Communities Workshop Working Papers)

The exigence and radical intimacy of the 2012 NCWAC Summit afforded me the rare occasion to discuss the reactive institutional cycles that subversive movements (in general) and WACommunities (more specifically) engender.

In addition to telling my own story, I invited colleagues and graduate students at the 2012 NCWAC Summit to grapple together over the vision statement that had framed our gathering. Among these aforementioned goals and objectives, I urged the group to achieve this single important outcome: the formation of a national network to make visible and public the work of community writing in and beyond the curriculum. I argued passionately that if we were going to mentor new leaders into the field—encourage graduate students and new professors to transgress boundaries of all kinds (institutional, disciplinary, intellectual, linguistic)—we need to be more transparent about the political implications and inevitable backlash this kind of work provokes.

WACommunities is a big idea with a sharp political edge. It is a capacious notion of WAC and Community Writing informed by Rhetoric, Sociolinguistics, Critical Theory, New Literacy Studies, and Composition Studies. This “big-ness” is both the source of its success as well as its marginalization as an educational movement locally here in New Mexico (and nationally). Aligning subfields such as WAC and Community Writing alongside Second Language Writing, Service Learning, and Basic Writing in conversation to attend to the question of how to better serve marginalized writers, was the overarching impetus for the 2012 NCWAC Summit. The intersectionality of these subfields represented an occasion for both reflection and disputation. Moreover, the cross-pollination of these subfields was designed to complicate the conversation and diversify stakeholders racially, linguistically, politically, and regionally. Reflecting on his experience of the 2012 NCWAC Summit, Brian Hendrickson observes:

Writing Across Communities, then, makes an important contribution to the ongoing conversation calling for a radical reenvisioning of the academic mission in light of recent developments in fields invested in literacy advocacy and instruction. However, advocates for this re-envisioning, in performing public intellectual work in service to the most vulnerable communities within their spheres of influence, are likely to render themselves vulnerable to those forces in the academy invested in maintaining conventional modes of



disciplinary knowledge-making and professionalization—modes that still hold sway over programmatic missions and tenure review boards inclined to apply to public intellectual work the pejorative *service*. (“The Hard Work of Imagining” 116)

I continue to puzzle over this conundrum as an educational activist and citizen scholar. Perhaps other scholars can help make better sense of this dilemma.

I look to Albert O. Hirschman’s *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* to help parse up the shadow ecology that has embattled the proponents of WACommunities locally and nationally. In *Language, Culture, Identity, and Citizenship in College Classrooms and Communities*, Juan Guerra poignantly represents the struggle of WACommunities advocates transgressing the limits of the rhetorical imagination of the academy. Reactive rhetoric, as feminist and civil rights activists have long asserted, is always an embodied discourse. The ad hominem attacks that characterize transgressive activists within and beyond the academy, women particularly, are embodied in some pretty revealing ways. Among the list of epithets lobbed across the political trenches of intellectual turf wars, the term “hard ass” is especially telling. I am reminded of the 1970s bumper sticker, “Well behaved women rarely make history.”

The public representations of my work and professional *ethos* in the scholarship, however, might suggest a mostly happy journey without the grief, the loss, and the rupture (Guerra “Writing for Transcultural;” Enacting Institutional Change.”). But leaving it at that would be an incomplete story—a story without exigence. If we are women, black, brown, indigenous, immigrant, non-native speakers of English, elderly, poor, uneducated, gay, mentally ill, incarcerated, we must learn to both endure and resist the micro-aggressions and violence to our dignity as part of the terrain of struggling to belong. Rhetorical listening as a “trope for interpretative invention and as a code for cross-cultural conduct” (1) that Krista Ratcliffe advances in *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* suggests one productive response to reactive rhetorics.

As I confessed to the participants of the 2015 UC Boulder Community Writing Conference workshop, the disturbance ecology of WACommunities represents a kind of parallel universe for me. The shadow ecology of my professional world mirrors the shadow ecology of my personal life. As a survivor, I exist in the tension between vulnerability and strength. Living in this New Mexico Zia cosmology, I have learned to accept the processes of disturbance ecologies as part of the natural cycle of life. The four sacred directions of the universe map onto the cycles of birth (east) and death (west), growth (south) and dormancy (north). Sometimes all we can do is just wait quietly. While rhetorical listening, like rhetorical silence, do have an important place in my experience, there is more to the story.

More than five years after my journey to the Monterey County Jail, my son's health, while stable and fully functioning as of October 2015, is ever-subject to change. Some might call it the "new normal." Ever living in the shadows of Edge City and residing precariously somewhere between the prison industrial complex, the mental health system, and the public education system, there are few constants for Jacob. He hasn't had a stable address for more than a year. A former research fellow at the United Nations, Jacob now lives and works among the indigent classes of this nation. The cycles of psychosis impact his entire universe of relationships—family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and strangers. This is the body he inherited. This is the story he must live, this bitter, beautiful life. As he wrote in his 1998 Schreiner College honor's thesis titled, *Stepping In*, Jacob reflects on his journey in his poetic tribute to Santiago, Chile:

## LUGARES

*Hay gente que trata de protegerse de  
los cambios del corazón, Prefiero  
experimentar los eventos internos míos y  
visitar los lugares corrientes.*



*Jacob in Chile*

When healthy, Jacob is both a consumer and an employee serving as a service coordinator for the California State Department of Rehabilitation helping others with disabilities secure the public services toward health and wellbeing (MA thesis). He understands deeply the necessity of *la dignidad*, the social and spiritual values of supporting himself through his own labor and making his own contributions as a citizen to his community. As a gay man, surviving the revolving door of the prison system and the culture of incarceration, the trauma of sexual violence remains indelibly etched in his body and memory. Jacob's BA degree in English, his transcultural educational experiences in Latin America, bilingual literacy in Spanish, and MA degree in Economics, and professional background in non-profit organizational development—credentials cultivated throughout his college years before his ten-year struggle

through the mental health and prison system from 2005 to 2015—have found a generative institutional space to grow.

Recently, Jacob helped his office in the Department of Rehabilitation coordinate a community civil rights celebration to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Disability Act in Santa Rosa, California on August 2015. Jacob, and his biological father, who also suffers from bipolar disorder, have found common ground and degrees of wholeness living with their disabilities. However, I am sure that few of Jacob's cell mates, the countless young men of color lining the jails of this nation, have mothers with PhDs in public rhetoric to plead their cases. Even more importantly, white privilege continues to condition the outcome of criminal justice cases in our communities. Race, privilege, and civic literacy are inextricably linked. Neither WAC nor Community Writing as institutionalized models have effectively or historically aligned these political realities toward the promotion of writing across academic, civic, and professional spheres. WACommunities, nevertheless, continues to take up the conversation at the margins of the academy.

Within my own departmental sphere six years after the murder of Héctor Torres and Stefania Gray, the Héctor Torres Fellowship has generously funded a number of graduate student research projects, including the recent dissertation defended by WACommunities leader Christine Beagle García on the Chicana rhetoric of Dolores Huerta. The Department of English lounge, named in Héctor's honor, remains a poignant and painful reminder. However, Stefania Gray, a single mother of two young daughters, is all but forgotten, erased from institutional memory and the sordid story of murder and mayhem at UNM. Institutional memory, ever-shaped by institutional power, tends to cling the narratives that remake us all in its image. The civil rights symposia series sponsored by WACommunities at UNM has persistently advanced the argument that civic literacy is both a civil right and civic responsibility, tenaciously interrogating the teaching of writing in and beyond the institution (*Writing Communities* Newsletter 2011; 2012).

## TRICKSTER TROPES: ENGAGING THE RHETORICS OF REACTION

The public demand for openness, transparency, and inclusion that the WACommunities project demands is a threatening and radical rhetoric. Cultural critique without cultivation is an empty exercise. In the process, we must also turn the reflexive mirror back on ourselves. The 2015 University of Colorado, Boulder Conference on Community Writing, an occasion that stirred the re-telling of this story, both successfully and enthusiastically invigorated the national discussion on the work of public writing. However, the elite institutional location, the class privilege, and limited sub-disciplinary scope of the UC Boulder Conference on Community Writing regrettably privileged the participation of largely white intellectuals in a conversation from which historically-excluded communities remained conspicuously absent. Moreover, the two hundred dollar registration fee required for the 2015 UC Boulder Conference on Community Writing, prohibitively expensive to students of color, public school teachers, contingent faculty, the working poor, the homeless, and other vulnerable community members, consequently eliminated the dissonance and disputation that the 2012 NCWAC Summit sought to catalyze three years prior. Finally, the gift-giving economy advanced by the 2012 NCWAC Summit stands in stark contrast to the 2015 UC Boulder Conference on Community Writing's implementation of a capital accumulation economy and campaign of institution-building.

To be a generative, as well as aggravating force, is the solemn duty of the tenured professor. My colleague Kent Ryden, author of *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing and the Sense of Place*, calls himself a "paid contrarian." But it's even more than that. It is the charge for which the privileges of tenure afford us—the burden to push the boundaries of the social systems in which we live, the social biota of the academy and the intellectual life cycle of knowledge-making processes. Teaching is built upon this very paradox, this troubling contradictory dynamic, always conceived in the tension between transmitting received wisdom and engaging in the construction of new knowledge. Aggravation and agitation is our business.

What's at stake here? WACommunities as structure has no financial resources. It has operated entirely on a gift giving economy through donations of time and energy and grant support. WACommunities has no director. No reporting lines. No administrative staff. No tenure lines. No sanctioned institutional space. No commercial textbook contracts or royalties. Nevertheless, WACommunities organizers have sponsored over two dozen symposia, colloquia, conferences, Write On! Workshops, and Celebrations of Student Writing, serving thousands of students, faculty members, and local citizens in the past ten years—all completely free and open to the public with a banquet style-lunch included. Because of an organizational commitment to inclusion, all WACommunities events are completely open. There are no registration fees, no registration forms, no limits to participation. It's a come-as-you-are approach to democratic inclusion.

A sufficiency economic model or a kind parable of the loaves and fishes have shaped our ways of doing business. We build the moment and the community comes. We grapple with the ambiguities of providing for uncertain numbers as best we can, and then we make do with what we have. If we have more food than we need, we give it away to students. If we have less than we need, we share. Moreover, because of an organizational commitment to openness and transparency, all WACommunities events, expenses, grant-support sources, operating budgets, and outcomes reports remain public, posted annually to the UNM WAC website (WAC at UNM). What's at stake here is maintaining "an open space for democracy" in civic literacy education and public rhetoric in and beyond the university (Williams 41). What's at stake here is cultivating a cultural rhetorical ecology of writing that is generative and just.

Reflecting on her experiences working with students for the WACommunities sponsored Celebration of Student Writing at UNM, Genevieve García de Mueller notes:

You don't want to devalue the kinds of things that students are already doing. They're civically engaged every day. They might not be doing the kinds of work that we think as civic engagement, but they are civically engaged at home talking about politics, talking about issues, trying to get their families

to do certain things. . . . [As for] the Celebration of Student Writing—that’s engaging with a certain community, that’s engaging with freshmen and teaching them how to engage the campus community and talk about their own writing and literacy practices. That’s a form of civic engagement because we’re asking them to do certain kinds of things which could be seen as political things because they’re taking a stance on writing. (qtd in Guerra *Language, Culture, Identity, and Citizenship* 163)

So what’s at stake here? What WACommunities generated through these organizing principles is rhetorical presence. As civil rights movements throughout history have revealed, transgressive power does not convert to acquired power without a price. The economies of dissent are costly. The places we need to be doing the work of community writing is in classrooms across the curriculum, in the prison system, in public health facilities, and at the edges of human suffering. This work is disruptive, disturbing, and distressing. Invoking Cornell West’s notion of prophetic pragmatism, I see restorative justice as the most productive and most difficult response. As West reflects in *Democracy Matters*, “The tragicomic is the ability to laugh and retain a sense of life’s joy—to preserve hope even while staring in the face of hate and hypocrisy—as against falling into the nihilism of paralyzing despair” (16). The emotional, intellectual, and spiritual labor demanded depletes and transforms us.

I wish to make a distinction here between advocacy rhetoric that WACommunities promotes vs. the kind of jeremiad rhetoric of the neo-liberal right that positions under-served student populations as a kind of “value added” property. As a rhetorical act, advocacy rhetoric stirs reactive rhetoric. As a spiritual act, advocacy rhetoric relies on a gift giving economy and a kind of coyote medicine—invoking trickster tropes that flip the script by changing the terms of the conversation. For example, trickster tropes in response to what Hirschman calls the *futility thesis* (the claim that change is useless/futile) promote a counter-discourse of open possibilities. Trickster tropes counter the *perversity thesis* (the claim that change is a distortion) with conceptually capacious alternatives. And trickster tropes battle the *jeopardy thesis* (the claim that change endangers the status quo) by foregrounding the positive potential of the unknown.

Trickster tropes are shapeshifting discourses that help us navigate the shadow ecologies and allow us to lead through ambiguity rather than wait for ambiguity to be resolved in order to lead.

In closing, the provocative questions we need to be asking the leaders of our field and our institutions are: Who is benefitting from the way things are? How might the system be changed to better serve our most vulnerable communities? Who would be most impacted from these changes? Paul Farmer, international epidemiologist and social justice activist, argues in *Pathologies of Power* that our most vulnerable communities locally and globally are: the poor, prisoners, and students. As educators, our spheres of influence should attend to all of these. Because when we talk about the poor, we are talking about women, children, people of color, immigrants—the historically excluded. When we talk about prisoners we talk about the mentally ill, addicts, men and women of color, children, and the poor. When we talk about students we are talking about all of these—people in transition and poised with transformative potential.



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## NOTES

- 1 Dedicated to the memory of Paolo Luka (December 12, 1982-February 12, 1983). *Gozarse uno la carne del alma.*
- 2 A special thanks to Cristina Kirklighter, Tobi Jacobi, Shannon Carter, and Michele Eodice for their encouragement and support in sharing this story.

## APPENDIX A



*Vicente Ximenes, circa 1939, Civilian Conservation Corps, Floresville, Texas.*

### CITIZEN SCHOLARS AND THE CULTURAL RHETORICAL ECOLOGY OF WRITING ACROSS COMMUNITIES

MICHELLE HALL KELLS  
UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO  
OCTOBER 15, 2015

COMMUNITY WRITING CONFERENCE  
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO, BOULDER  
AGENDA

Thursday, October 15, 2015  
8:45-10:45 a.m.

8:45-9:00      Preview of Workshop Agenda:

Writing Across Communities Resource Packet

- TESOL Forthcoming Encyclopedia Entry: “Writing Across Communities: Cultural Rhetorical Ecologies and Transcultural Citizenship;”
- WACommunities at UNM 2004 to 2014 (History);
- *Language, Culture, Identity, and Citizenship in College Classrooms and Communities* by Juan Guerra (NCTE-Routledge, 2015).

- 9:00-9:15 Introductions (Small Groups of 4):
- Who are you?
  - Where are you from?
  - What questions do you bring with you?
- 9:15-9:30 Representative Anecdote: Kells  
“Vicente Ximenes and the Civilian Conservation Corps: Literacy, Ecology, and Civic Engagement.”
- 9:30-10:30 Growing Action Plans for Cultivating Cultural Rhetorical Ecologies of Writing In & Beyond the University  
(Mapping the Six Dimensions of the Cultural Rhetorical Ecologies of Your Institutions)
- Principles
  - Privilege
  - Partnerships
  - Populations (People & Places)
  - Pedagogies & Practices
  - Programs
- 10:30-10:45 Review of Workshop Agenda:  
Small Group Reports  
What Next?  
WACommunities Resource Workshop Working Papers  
<<https://sites.google.com/site/resourcewac/>>

**“Writing Across Communities” as a Hermeneutic Project:**

Cultivating Cultural Rhetorical Ecologies through Public Rhetoric & Community Literacy (Writing) In and Beyond Your Institutions

**A Heuristic for Growing Action Plans: (Small Group Discussion)**

**(10 minutes/6 Dimension=60 Minutes)**

**Roles: Time Keeper; Facilitator; Recorder; Reporter.**

1. Principles:
  - What are the key principles and core values of your institution; writing program; department; how does your institutional mission and vision statement represent ethnolinguistic heterogeneity, cultural pluralism, and ideological pluralism? What are your first principles and core values? How does your vision and mission reflect, align, resist, and/or advance the values and principles of your institution?
2. Privilege:
  - What populations does your institution privilege; what tropes (images, icons, and symbols) represent these privileged identities and social positions; who benefits from the way things are; who are the most vulnerable populations in your institution; writing program; department; how are these groups represented, reflected, or erased? who are the primary beneficiaries of your vision and action plan?
3. Partnerships:
  - Who shares your key principles and core values in your institution? writing program; department? With whom do you stand in the field (scholarship); who shares your sphere of concern (within the institution; outside the institution); who can help you expand your sphere of influence (within the institution; outside the institution)? What is your stake in this partnership/project? How do you see your role?
4. Populations (People & Places):
  - Which discourse communities shape the cultural rhetorical ecology of your institution; who are your students? What languages and literacy practices do

they bring to the classroom? How does place (region; socioeconomic conditions; generational identification, etc.) influence your institution; writing program; department; how does your institution engage/promote (or fail to engage and promote) ethnolinguistic heterogeneity, cultural diversity, and ideological/intellectual pluralism;

5. Pedagogies & Practices:

- What are the current pedagogical practice for teaching writing and literacy at your institution; how do these pedagogies and practices reflect, align, conflict and/or resist your key principles and core values; whom does the curriculum privilege? Whom does it fail to serve? How do the ethnolinguistic identities and cultural diversity of your student populations inform current curriculum and pedagogical practice across the institution?

6. Projects & Programs:

- Which programs advance the key principles and core values about writing, language practice, and literacy education across your institution? What is your relationship to these programs? Who are the primary beneficiaries of these programs? How do these programs engage and respond to the educational interests of your most vulnerable student populations? How does ethnolinguistic heterogeneity, cultural diversity, and ideological pluralism inform community engagement, curriculum development, and learning outcomes of your institution, writing program, or department?

### **Growing Action Plans: What Next?**

Start a conversation (within your department; your classroom; your writing program; your institution);

- Build a narrative in the public sphere (create a public story);
- Construct an archive (document the journey; keep it open, transparent, and inclusive);

- Invite partnerships (across the institution; within the larger civic community; from the field of Rhetoric and Composition);
- Establish an intellectual commonwealth around your key principles and core values about language, writing, and civic engagement;
- Share your journey through multiple voices across different spheres (in scholarship; newsletters; digital media; colloquia series, etc.);
- Describe your collective experience (as change agents) to key stakeholders to enact institutional change (administrators; regents; legislators; journalists, etc.);
- Stir dissonance, recognize dissent, and engage difference (Note: Deliberative democracy grows out of engaged and agonistic pluralism; Social change, in turn, emerges out of shifting relationships within dynamic disturbance ecologies);
- Promote diversity as an index (assessment measurement) of a healthy cultural rhetorical ecology in your institution.

Hermeneutics represents the cross-disciplinary rhetorical practice of exegesis (the interpretation of texts); the act of producing and consuming written, verbal, digital, and nonverbal communication; the term hermeneutics is derived from the Greek deity Hermes—a messenger god; the god of networks, roads, commerce, and thieves; mythical figure who unabashedly transgresses boundaries.



Michelle Hall Kells is Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of New Mexico where she teaches graduate and undergraduate classes in 20th Century Civil Rights Rhetoric, Contemporary and Classical Rhetoric, Writing and Cultural Studies, and Discourse Studies. She serves as Special Assistant to the Dean of the College of Arts and Science and Program Chair of the Writing Across Communities (WAC) initiative at UNM. Kells received the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library Research Fellowship in 2008. She is a Senior Fellow at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center for Health Policy at UNM. Kells' research interests include civil rights rhetorics, sociolinguistics, and composition/literacy studies. Kells is coeditor of *Attending to the Margins: Writing, Researching, and Teaching on the Front Lines* (Heinemann, 1999) and *Latino/a Discourses: On Language, Identity, and Literacy Education* (Heinemann, 2004). Her work is featured in the journals *JAC*, *Written Communication*, *Reflections*, and *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* as well as a number of edited books including *Cross-Language Relations in Composition, Dialects, Englishes, Creoles, and Education*; *Who Belongs in America?: Presidents, Rhetoric, and Immigration*. Kells is author of *Hector P. Garcia: Everyday Rhetoric and Mexican American Civil Rights* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2006). Her current book project is *Vicente Ximenes and LBJ's "Great Society": The Rhetoric of Mexican American Civil Rights Reform*.