

Early Career Scholars' Encounters, Transitions, and Futures:

A Conversation on Community Engagement

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INTRODUCTIONS

Megan Faver Hartline: I am the director of community learning at Trinity College, a small liberal arts college in Hartford, Connecticut, where I work to create and strengthen institutional structures for community engagement by designing opportunities for students, faculty, and community partners to build relationships and work together. This work builds on my research examining how university policies shape the way faculty and graduate students develop community-engaged projects. My co-edited collection, *Writing for Engagement: Responsive Practice for Social Action*, was published by Lexington Books in 2018, and I have co-authored articles in *Community Literacy Journal*, *Reflections*, and *Computers and Composition Online*.

Vani Kannan: I'm an assistant professor in the department of English at Lehman College, CUNY. I research and write about writing across contexts, multimodal/

multigenre composition, transnational/women-of-color feminisms, and building solidarities in struggles that destabilize campus/community divisions. I teach courses in composition, literature, creative nonfiction, and women's and gender studies, and work with the Writing Across the Curriculum program. My individual and collaboratively authored articles appear in *Enculturation*, *Studies on Asia*, *Reflections*, *Community Literacy Journal*, *Literacy in Composition Studies*, *Journal of Writing Assessment*, and *Journal of Academic Freedom*.

Charles Lesh: I'm an assistant professor of English at Auburn University, where I teach graduate and undergraduate courses in public and community writing, critical spatial theory, genre studies, and composition theory. I did my PhD at Northeastern University, where I was introduced to community-engaged work in writing studies early on in coursework. Most notably, I've been engaged in a multiyear ethnographic study with graffiti writers in the city of Boston. This particular project became the subject of my dissertation (runner-up for the 2017 James Berlin Dissertation Award at CCCC) and a 2017 article in *Community Literacy Journal* ("Writing Boston"), inspired a forthcoming *Composition Studies* article, ("Writing Workshops"), and is now an in-process book manuscript.

Jessica Pauszek: I am the director of writing and an assistant professor at Texas A&M University - Commerce. My background from Western New York led me to explore working-class literacies and write a dissertation about the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers, an international working-class community writing/publishing network. Alongside members, I created print and digital archives to preserve these histories. My dissertation was runner-up for the 2018 James Berlin Dissertation Award and, based on this project, I received a 2018 Emergent Researcher Award. My writing has been published in *CCC*, *LiCS*, and *Reflections*. I am involved in various editing projects, including *Working and Writing for Change*, *New City Community Press*, and *Best of Journals in Rhetoric and Composition*. I am associate editor of *Reflections*.

INTRODUCTION

We are all early-career scholars engaged in community-focused work, though admittedly in very different ways. Each of us had been involved in community-engaged (CE) work in graduate school and started discussing the transition of CE work across disciplinary ranks (e.g., graduate student to assistant professor/associate director) and geographical space. What might those transitions teach us about the viability and pliability of community engagement? What connections could we draw across our projects and their mobility? And what might these connections say about the past, present, and future of community projects, research, and teaching in writing studies?

This dialogue began to take shape around three points of emphasis: encounters, transitions, and futures. In “Encounters,” we locate the origins of our work and identify what motivated us to pursue it and who had a guiding role in it. In “Transitions,” we reflect on some of the challenges and possibilities of community-based work across transitions between disciplinary contexts. In “Futures,” we each consider where we might go from here, both as individual scholars and as a subfield more generally.

We approached this dialogue as a conversation amongst colleagues, reflecting on our work, drawing some points of convergence and divergence, and discussing the future. We hope that others will take up these ideas and continue to build partnerships across the field to share such work.

ENCOUNTERS

Megan

My experiences with community writing began in the first semester of my PhD program at University of Louisville when I took a course on “community literacy” with Mary P. Sheridan. There, I encountered models of scholars connecting social justice inquiry and community outreach with their research on writing and rhetoric, and I knew pretty early on in that course that I wanted my own scholarly career to follow a similar track. Growing up liberal in a small, rural Texas town, I had never known exactly what to *do* with my progressive beliefs to create change, especially as I found myself drawn to

academic study. Community writing helped me see the explicit connections I could make between the reading, thinking, researching, and writing that I was excited about pursuing in academia with on-the-ground community projects that could make a difference.

The semester following that class, I worked with a team of graduate students to plan Louisville's Digital Media Academy (DMA), a two-week digital production camp for sixth-grade girls from historically underperforming schools that is designed to provide digital tools for girls to create, rather than consume, representations (such as image manipulations and videos) that align with how they see themselves and the world around them. Two years of designing and implementing DMA were followed by other partnerships with the Louisville Council on Developmental Disabilities and the Parklands of Floyds Fork, all of which were shaped by the relationship-building work of my faculty mentors—Mary P. Sheridan, Brenda J. Brueggemann, and Beth Boehm. Across these projects, I was not only able to see how my mentors built relationships and shaped projects to address local concerns, I also learned to use my expertise in digital media, curriculum design, and research methods to simultaneously answer my own research questions and help community organizations reach their goals.

These projects have been foundational for my growth as a scholar, serving as key research sites for my dissertation, publications, and presentations as well as giving me the confidence to try out community-based projects in my teaching. Perhaps most importantly, the knowledge I gained has been essential for the work I'm doing now at Trinity College. Though my new city and institution are very different, the projects and relationships I cultivated through community-engaged work in Louisville and the lessons I learned from it are applicable to what I'm doing now, whether designing a new course on community-based research methods, meeting with a faculty member about how to connect their writing assignments with a community component of their course, or talking with community partners about potential student projects.



Hartline and DMA campers prepare for a photo scavenger hunt to explore the University of Louisville campus (June 2015). Photo by Tom Fougousse

In graduate school, I learned the basics of reciprocal, ethical community engagement, mostly through reading scholarship and following the lead of my mentors as they navigated relationships with our community partners. I began integrating this kind of work across all aspects of my professional life, growing into the challenging and multilayered work of developing and sustaining community partnerships myself. Ultimately, having one of my first doctoral courses be in community literacy decisively charted my scholarly path through and beyond graduate school, and it's led me to a deeply fulfilling position where I am able to create structures and projects that encourage strong, reciprocal partnerships between Hartford and Trinity.

Jess

My interest in community engagement started in my Master's program at Northeastern University in Boston. In a class with Chris Gallagher (and Charlie!) we read the work of Paula Mathieu and Diana George, and I started thinking, for the first time, about service-learning. I was able to explore what Mathieu calls the "public turn," which "asks teachers to connect the writing that students and they themselves do with 'real world' texts, events, or exigencies" (Mathieu

2005,1). For me, service learning became a tangible enactment of theory—something that could move what happens in the classroom to ideally impact a larger community as well.

This sense of *doing* was important to me because I grew up in a working-class community in Dunkirk, New York. Most of my family worked in factories (steel, locomotive, juice packaging, animal food, etc), and I felt as if my academic work needed to involve the physicality of my body in some way. I felt guilty—and still do—that I get to think and write for a living.

Charlie

This “sense of *doing*” that Jess refers to seems super important to me, not just because I grew up nearby her in Buffalo, 45 minutes up *the* 90, as Western New Yorkers would put it. It reminds me of Labor Day 2014, when I was at “The Lab,” a graffiti spot in Boston. After I told one graffiti writer, who goes by the name “SENSE,” that I taught writing at a university, he interjected and said, gesturing to the piece he was completing, “Yeah, man, this is my favorite writing: a bunch of people with spray cans writing on the wall. Some people would rather be at the beach on Labor Day. We’d rather be wasting away in this concrete jungle.” This moment always seemed telling to me in terms of community-based work and what attracts us to it. It tells of the requisite expansion of what “counts” as meaningful writing, and it also shows a certain disposition—likely born from our own histories—required to ethically and fully engage in this work. It’s the work we’d “rather” do.

Jess

Service-learning gave me the language to blend my need to *do/perform/labor/work*, with actual methods of enacting social justice or civic engagement. A couple semesters after my first class with Chris Gallagher, we co-taught an upper-division, community-based writing course called “Writing Boston.” Our students partnered with a local nonprofit organization, 826 Boston, and a local middle school. I read theories of public writing, worked alongside the nonprofit and K-16 students to develop a community-writing project about local workers, taught about community-engagement, and reflected on my

role across these experiences. This pushed me to seek out a PhD program to expand my community-based interests.

Within Syracuse's Composition and Cultural Rhetoric PhD program, I worked on multiple community-based writing projects, with ranging levels of success, progress, and sometimes failure. The main project that I began in Steve Parks' graduate seminar informed my research through coursework and ultimately became my dissertation and now book project. The FWWCP Archival Project, as we call it, has evolved substantially from a mere hope of building a working-class community archive to a project that now includes the physical creation of print and digital archives of working-class writing (see: <http://fwwcp.gn.apc.org>), study abroad civic writing courses, and partnerships with community members, archivists, librarians, artists, and scholars across continents (Harding et al 2018; Pauszek 2017)—which I'll say more about later.

Charlie

I often think that my attraction to community-based research stems from spending a lot of time in bars as a kid. My parents were bar owners, and I would clean floors and bar tops, restock coolers, and talk to regulars. Some of those years felt middle class, comfortable. Others were dotted by home evictions, living with grandparents, and real, day-to-day economic uncertainty. I was initially rejected from SUNY Buffalo, the only school I could afford, only to be accepted later through Access to College Excellence (ACE), a program that identifies promising students without the academic record for admission and offers them resources to acclimate to the university system. Once there, I was a Pell-Grant kid, working a variety of jobs and generally disconnected from academic spaces. Due to some very good teachers, I found myself figuring out how to apply to graduate programs in literature. I arrived at Northeastern, unprepared, with that sinking feeling that I was not long for that place.

This changed quickly. My first semester, I took Chris Gallagher's "Globalization and the Geopolitics of Writing" course. I was immediately blown away by the scholarship we were reading, about the connections that academics were making with communities beyond institutional walls. After the first meeting, I remember

showing up to Chris's office hours and asking him, "what is rhetoric and composition?" Chris's response was much less "*this* is what the field is" and much more "well, what kind of work do you want to do in the field?" This meeting, and that class, made space for me, and Chris encouraged me to turn my personal interest in graffiti—which started at a high-school friend's kitchen table—into a seminar paper. He became my advisor and that project became my dissertation.

Like Jess, I was immediately attracted to a "sense of *doing*" in community-based research. This continued in the next course I took with Chris, "Writing and Community Engagement," where we read about the origins, iterations, and future directions of the public turn. Looking back, this course was the foundation for the rest of my work in graduate school. We put our readings and discussions of central community-engagement principles (reciprocity, positionality, and ethical research) into practice through a partnership with the Union of Minority Neighborhoods (UMN), a community organization in Boston. The UMN was engaged in the Boston Busing and Desegregation Project designed to archive stories that surrounded busing and mobilize them to open up space for future discussions on race, class, and urban identity. Our class assisted with oral history interviews with individuals affected by desegregation/busing and its ongoing legacy in the city.

Working with UMN even in this limited role taught me some core aspects of community engagement and some specific skills for qualitative research. Concretely, it taught me the fundamentals of qualitative interviewing, essential for my ethnographic work. It taught me the rhythms of community work: the emails, travel, setbacks, successes, failures. It also taught me to think locally. Because UMN was engaged in such place-specific work, my introduction to community-university partnerships really began with emplacement, with questions of space and place. Folks have written about how graduate school can encourage, and indeed force, students to elide locality in search of universal, disciplinary knowledge (Vandenberg and Clary-Lemon 2007). Working with UMN taught me that community-engagement work can come into tension with, and productively push back against, this spatial elision, and the lessons I learned about Boston—its cartographies, its social histories, its

inequities—really carried over into the grounded work I did with graffiti writers. At the end of the semester, I wrote a seminar paper envisioning what a methodology for working with graffiti writers might look like, given the work we had done around ethical, reciprocal, reflexive, and emplaced practices. This became the methodology for my dissertation.

I was really fortunate in these earliest encounters—in seminars, in Chris’s office, in the field—to learn that the space for community work was not finite or fixed but expanding or retracting, based on the type of work we do within the conditions and constraints in which we find ourselves. I learned that community engagement is only as capacious as we make it, and circling back, I think this connected to the bars I grew up in, the spaces, people, and situations I encountered at an early age. When I was researching one of these early papers, I came across the following passage in Diana George and Paula Mathieu’s (2013) “A Place for the Dissident Press in a Rhetorical Education: ‘Sending up a signal flare in the darkness.’”:

Moreover, if we choose to teach public writing—as many of us do—just what public writing do we teach? Do we teach the rhetoric of electoral politics, the language of corporate structures, the appeal of nonprofits? What about the rhetoric that students are warned against—the bare outrage of radical politics? What is the rhetoric our students need for this time, in this place? (247)

It seems the same might be asked for community engagement. This moment directed the type of work I wanted to do—to look beyond the stable, strategic contours of engagement and to seek out the risky, temporal, and spatially precarious forms and to see how they might test the limits of our broader public turn.

Vani

I learned the term “community literacy” in my late 20s, after I’d spent about 10 years doing a variety of literacy work in after-school programs, tutoring agencies, libraries, and nonprofits. The term gave me an “in” to the field of composition and rhetoric and a way of thinking about writing across contexts beyond the college classroom.

A lot of the scholarly writing I did during graduate school grew out of what might be termed “community literacy” or “community-based” work, but as byproduct of it, not the initial goal of it. For me, terms like “community-engaged research” position research as the primary goal. I have mixed feelings about individual writing that emerges from “community” work; as a result, I gravitate towards collective writing projects. In 2011, I was part of a collective of writers that collaboratively authored a book on the Occupy Wall Street movement, and I grew interested in how writers can chronicle both large-scale movements and small-scale work towards social justice and the ethics/principles that shape various orientations towards this work. For example, a former student from a women’s writing nonprofit and I coauthored an article for *Reflections* on some of the frustrations we came up against when she found out that the organization’s mission statement framed her as “at-risk” (Smith and Kannan 2015). It unraveled a whole nonprofit funding scheme and the rhetoric needed to make this work legible to funders. We felt that this rhetoric reinforced deficient, racist models of the students who were really the backbone of the organization, and often the shining stars of their high schools.

TA working conditions played a big role in my shift from thinking of “community literacy” as something that happened off-campus to critically engaging campus as a site of literacy-building and action. When I moved to Colorado, I became involved with the Romero Theater Troupe, a grassroots, social justice-oriented theater organization in Denver. At first, I participated/performed in a theater organizing campaign in which custodians at Denver’s Auraria campus told their stories as part of a campaign for better working conditions (and to build a coalition with students). A group of us at Colorado State University were then inspired to create a similar play about academic labor, engaging people across rank and campus (working with faculty at Front Range Community College and grad student/adjunct/tenure-track faculty at CSU). Three of us chronicled that work (Kannan et al 2015) and conducted follow-up interviews with participants two years later to see whether participation in the theater project had impacted their teaching, research, and activism. I am fascinated by the long-term impact of *participation* in projects that might otherwise seem fleeting. For example, one participant decided during the course of the play to not go into academia and instead



*Performing with the Romero Theater Troupe in Fort Collins, CO
(February 2014). Photo by Kannan.*

became an online course developer; at her first job, she successfully argued in favor of combining two newly advertised contingent positions without benefits into one full-time position with benefits.

When I moved to Syracuse, I continued to find myself in research/writing collaborations that grew out of organizing work. For example, Ben Kuebrich, Yanira Rodríguez, and I (2016) wrote a piece for *Community Literacy Journal* that grew out of our participation in an 18-day sit-in at SU's campus, which informed a workshop we put on at the 2015 Conference on Community Writing on the corporatization of universities. Before we wrote this article and facilitated the workshop, we collaborated with many others to document the sit-in through a variety of local media in Syracuse, to establish a student-driven narrative of the movement.

For me “community literacy” or “community writing” requires a dialectic between local grassroots organizing, broader national/transnational social movement exigencies, and the concrete pedagogical work of our classrooms/curricula. I try to center the multi-genre writing of social movements in the writing classes I teach; I’m also interested in how other educators work to foster social movement literacies—or, as Kynard (2013) terms them, “protest literacies”—in the classroom. For example, in my dissertation research on a political organization called the Third World Women’s Alliance, I found that professors were using the group’s archives to teach students about intersectional feminism and compile digital histories that local political movements could then use as they trained new members. This is an amazing convergence of various subfields of comp/rhet: critical pedagogy, collaborative writing, multimodality, public writing, historiography, and archival research that provides direct, material aid to political organizers. I’m excited to explore more of the ways in which educators see their classes as acting in material coalition with movements. In her essay on Audre Lorde and June Jordan’s work as writing instructors at CUNY, Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2014) writes that composition is at its core about teaching students to be “composed”; social movement writing is a site of composition that breaks down this imperative.

TRANSITIONS

Jess

As a graduate student and even as a new faculty member, it can be difficult to create meaningful community projects, for multiple reasons. First, most of us are in a transient role as a graduate student, and possibly even as faculty, living in various geographic locations (for me this was Boston, Massachusetts, Syracuse, New York, and now Commerce, Texas). Next, there are the material conditions of earning a low wage in graduate school while having coursework, teaching, and, in my case, needing extra work to make ends meet at some stages (babysitting, tutoring, coaching, being an RA, working in a library). For me, there was a strange tension between enjoying the graduate work I was doing and seeing how underpaid it was. And, yet, I never wanted to complain because I made more as a graduate TA than my father made to support our family of four when I was a kid.

I thought that having a tenure-track position might alleviate some tensions or issues I noticed in graduate school, but I've actually experienced a lot of carry over. A tenure-track position adds more income, to be sure, but then you're met with student loans kicking in your first year of moving, yet again, to a new location. In effect, a time-consuming endeavor such as community work often intensifies an already overloaded graduate program or tenure-track beginning. Sometimes, the very position of being a member of a university disconnects you from the larger community. When we do find a niche, community-based projects require scholars to work rhetorically to ensure that they are considered in annual reviews, tenure/promotion evaluations, and more. This is not always easy, especially when reflexive community work should rarely be a simple success narrative. Therefore, I think it's important to represent the material conditions that shape, stall, progress, and even obstruct our work. For me, it's been the failures, the struggles, and then eventually—in some cases—the moments of progress that mean something and teach me about community organizing.

If we think about doing ethically responsive work, it's also important to address the issues that shape beginning, sustaining, and promoting community-based work. Many of the projects that I began as a graduate student were what Mathieu (2005) calls "tactical" projects—they had a distinct time and space that had an easily definable end. But, importantly, these projects were also possible (and I believe ethical) because my mentors had established networks that encouraged partnerships in the communities where I now was working. As a graduate student, I relied heavily on this networked support and tactical projects, and as a faculty member, I show the students I mentor examples of community work and am transparent about the factors (finances, labor, time, ethics) involved.

Megan

It is so important to consider the structures that enable and constrain scholars to pursue community engagement. One thing I've been struck by in my work at Trinity is how much I'm able to accomplish *because* of the parameters of my position that I would not be able to do if I was in a tenure-track appointment in an English or writing studies department. A large part of my job has been to engage with

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FWWCP/FED Collection in Progress. Photo by Pauszek.



FWWCP Collection Sorted and Boxed. Photo by Pauszek.

the city of Hartford by learning more about community partners and their goals for the city and to create programmatic structures that encourage our students to connect their classroom learning with on-the-ground projects. Teaching and research are part of my job, but much less so than for any of my co-authors, and community engagement is threaded throughout every part of my position here, which creates different constraints for my work.

Jess

The main project (the FWWCP Archival Project) that I began during my PhD program is something I've continued in my tenure-track job. However, geography, funding, and university employment are still factors that impact this work.

For the FWWCP Archival Project, with Steve Parks, I began working via email and Skype with the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers, (FWWCP) a working-class writing and publishing network that originated in London, England but expanded transnationally. Its focus grew from class identity to include experiences of gender, race, vocation, immigration, language, sexuality, and more. Steve had worked with the FWWCP for years, and their goal was to create an archive of the self-published texts created during its tenure—1976-2007. These publications were written by working-class people like my family. And it was the first time that I read writing that connected—maybe not geographically, but with the histories embodied by the community I grew up in—to what I wanted to do.

Material conditions shaped the archival project as well. In fact, due to lack of finances, little institutional/governmental support, and the aging membership, many of the FWWCP's publications were scattered in basements and garages with no means to sustain their preservation. Since 2012, I've been part of a team of collaborators in the United Kingdom and the United States that has found a space to house the FWWCP Collection at the Trades Union Congress Library at London Metropolitan University, as well as begun digitizing this material. We have collected, sorted, catalogued, and boxed more than 2,300 of the FWWCP's community publications (Pauszek and Portillo 2018). This work, however, requires extensive physical

labor—sometimes literally hauling 100 pounds of publications across London, as well as sorting through dozens of boxes of material, and shelving, cataloguing, and re-shelving this same material. It also requires mobility between countries for me and between areas of the city for others, as well as financial resources and institutional support for purchasing archival products, digitizing publications, and developing an index, catalogue, and website for preservation. But I've found the connection between *thinking* and *doing* with this work. I've been able to think deeply and theorize the ideological impacts of studying/highlighting/preserving working-class voices, while also enacting this work through the creation of community archives.

The most meaningful thing that emerged during my work with the FWWCP/FED was a connection to a community, geographically removed from my home, that continuously pushes me to see how literacy and class narratives intersect. A community that has opened their homes to me and given me the chance to see how my personal understandings of class can—and in fact, do—shape the work that I do. The geography, funding, and employment constraints that I brought up earlier are still actively a part of this work but the FWWCP has taught me that these material conditions are not extraneous factors, in the same way that my understanding of class is not extra but rather an embodied and embedded positionality that I bring to my understanding of community engagement.

Charlie

My community-based work is ethnographic in nature, and because graffiti is ultimately an ephemeral (and illegal) community-writing practice, the contours of those engagements shifted daily while I was in the field. Some days I was a lookout. On others, I found spaces for us to write. Others were spent helping write letters for community-arts organizations.

As you might expect, this sort of tactical and emplaced fluidity left me anxious about moving to a new role far away from Boston. Now that I'm at Auburn, reflecting on this project a bit and writing up a book based on it with community members, I thought I'd throw two more terms into the mix—*time* and *flexibility*—that have been helpful

for me in making sense of the shift from graduate school into my current role.

Time: One of the things I learned in graduate school is that developing ethical and reciprocal partnerships takes time. I wrote in my dissertation that for me this meant long days of just “hanging out” with graffiti writers, figuring out what my role might be. As Jess already wrote, this necessarily slow development of relationships is made difficult by material, academic, and geographic constraints. Now being in a research position on the tenure-track, time remains elemental to engaging in this work. I’m certainly not the first person to write about this, but a push to maintain a healthy publication record often runs counter to the unfolding nature of the work we do in communities. Megan is right to point out that different jobs require different types of labor, some more accommodating to productive partnerships than others. Like Mathieu (2005) writes, academic schedules are not community schedules. (Also, tenure clocks are always ticking.) To sustain this type of work within and after transitions requires a critical engagement with time in all its various forms and intersections: personal, professional, community, academic, etc.

Flexibility: So, time intersects with transitions in a few different ways, and in reflecting on them, I keep coming back to flexibility. Distance adds new requirements to sustain productive partnerships. My work in Boston was radically situated, focused on the local conditions of place and engaging the community in tactical, located, and often fleeting ways. So, what does this look like now that I live over 1,000 miles away? Well, it looks different. In graduate school, I was *available*. I had a rule that I would never say no to any graffiti-related activity. Now, my relationships with Boston graffiti writers who I maintain regular contact with have taken on a more consistently stable, even strategic, character. I write letters of inquiry to local arts festivals. I help write grant applications for organizations. I write copy for websites so that writers can sell graffiti-related goods. I edit answers for online interviews. None of these genres will directly show up in my tenure dossier, yet my continued work with the community relies fundamentally on them. I’ve relied on the strength of these

community bonds in sustaining a relationship that remains beneficial to all parties involved.

In thinking about time and flexibility, I recognize the privilege in my position. Though challenging in terms of transitions, the work I did in graduate school has fuelled my research program in my first three years on the tenure track. And, my job has also allowed me to start laying new groundwork here, in Auburn. I've begun to take time to tutor and work with a local literacy organization, to teach classes in which students partner with local communities, and more. Eventually this work might transform into something more sustainable and recognizable, but as Megan and Vani describe below, I'm in the early stages of learning this new place, volunteering, and seeing how I might contribute.

Honestly, transitions are hard. Sustaining productive community partnerships across distances is hard. For me, it takes a lot of texts, emails, and phone calls. And time. And flexibility. But I do think that sustaining these relationships, and developing new ones, can help form networks across spaces, networks of our own trajectories that focus our work in local conditions while continually expanding our broader understandings of meaningful writing.

Vani

I just began my work as an assistant professor, but I've been struggling with this question of transitions for years. It feels counterintuitive to move somewhere to engage in "community" work. I became connected to community literacy and organizing work that I believed in when I lived in Brooklyn, New York and then moved to Colorado to earn my Master's (chasing funding) and to work with the Community Literacy Center at Colorado State University. Through campus organizing work, I became connected to people from Syracuse's Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program and eventually ended up there to pursue my PhD. Four years later, I moved to the Bronx. The transitions in location have been my primary struggle—each move has been wrenching and painful because of the necessity of uprooting from a deeply committed group of people doing work on a hyper-local level.

During my time in Syracuse, I spent a lot of time thinking about how to cultivate principles and practices for teaching, research, and organizing that transfer. It's a way for me to think about disciplinary conversations in transfer and recontextualization, but specifically in terms of how a commitment to social justice can be transferred and recontextualized in a world where both students and instructors are often uprooted from community to pursue work or education. To what extent can principles and practices for community literacy/organizing transfer across contexts?

Charlie

I've actually found myself thinking about issues of "transfer," a word we use a lot in writing studies, though not specifically in terms of our own research across geographic distances. How is the work I do with particular communities in Boston connected to the work I want to do here, in Auburn, a very different place with a very different history? I'm not sure they are connected, honestly, but I do think that there are things that can transfer across. As I mentioned above, I've been tutoring with a local coalition that focuses on adult literacy education, and I've recently thought about a graduate course on writing workshops and community engagement—pretty different than an ethnography with graffiti writers. But the orientation I *took* to community work remains the orientation I *take* to community work, a version of what Karen Johnson (2013) calls "mobile sustainability." For me, that means starting with community needs and goals; remaining spatially sensitive; sustaining open dialogue with stakeholders; and constantly interrogating my own positionality. Like Vani said, it's not that I've moved a particular project with me, but that particular projects emerge in the movement, and the "stuff" that transitions is really my own commitment to the work.

Vani

To whatever extent I've developed a set of principles that transfer across contexts, they involve orienting to local organizing work; learning the histories and ongoing legacies of the indigenous peoples and immigrant groups of the area as well as the political history and current climate of the area, focusing on the relationship between local organizations and broader social movements; engaging in local

work (currently, with the faculty union); and connecting students with local grassroots work that is meaningful to them.

Lately, I've been thinking back to my time teaching at the Brooklyn Public Library and Colorado State because I'm once again at a school where nearly all of the students have ties to the area surrounding the educational institution. I really love working in classrooms where we all somewhat share a local context and then shaping the curriculum around local issues and organizations. For me this is all part of thinking about the "porous borders" of the university (as Chandra Talpade Mohanty puts it in a forthcoming podcast interview), on a curricular level, where "community literacy" means becoming literate in the campus/surrounding community concerns and political struggles. How can students see their own knowledge as useful in collective action and orient to collective action as a way to build their own knowledge? I want to move my teaching in this direction.

Megan

My own transition has been a little different than everyone else's in that my position as a community engagement administrator means that some of the institutional barriers described previously are not an issue for me. Learning about histories of and current social justice work in Hartford was a high priority for my first year on the job, and developing new engaged projects is an integral part of my position that must tie into every element—administrative, teaching, and research—of my work. So, as someone whose job it is to help others navigate community engagement structures, I want to build on Vani's principles and offer a few thoughts on the transitions that are more applicable to emerging engaged scholars, whether you are considering doing community engagement for the first time, thinking about the job market, or trying to engage in a new community. These are some of the barriers I've seen in my own and others' experiences and how you might consider moving forward when faced with these common challenges:

- **In Graduate School:** Jess's point that the projects she embarked on in graduate school were made possible because of the relational network building of her mentors is key for taking on engagement projects of your own. All the major

projects I worked on in graduate school were led by faculty with longer, deeper connections in the Louisville community than I would have been able to build while also trying to navigate graduate school.

- **On The Job Market:** Really consider what your primary professional goals are. For me, my main goal was to work in a position where I could do meaningful work in the local community, whether that was through an English department, a community engagement office, or a nonprofit. Figure out how you want community engagement to be part of your work and do your best to find a career path and a workplace that will fit, including asking potential employers questions about opportunities and resources for this type of work.
- **In a New Geographic Area:** Start by finding a cause you care about and volunteering. This is a great way to build your own relational networks that can lead to exciting community projects. One of our new community-engaged courses at Trinity is called “Tax Policy and Inequality in Hartford,” which has grown out of Professor Serena Laws’ years of volunteer work with United Way’s VITA tax assistance program. Laws is helping set up a VITA site at Trinity, and a large part of her students’ work will be offering tax assistance at the site. Through volunteering, you can develop a strong relationship with and better understand the needs of an organization before jumping into a project.
- **At a New Institution:** Find your “coalition of the willing,” a phrase that likeminded folks at Trinity often use to describe the faculty, staff, and students who share resources and support one another in our joint work of connecting Trinity and Hartford. At your school, seek out people in the community engagement office and see what resources they offer or who they might recommend you reach out to or grab coffee with other faculty who are engaged locally. You likely aren’t alone in your interest, so find the people who can help you. (CCCC also created a Strategic Task Force to provide resources about funding, mentoring, building programs, responding to issues, etc: <https://strategicactions.org>)

There are always going to be barriers to pursuing community engagement, but figuring out what those barriers are and identifying the people and resources that can help you overcome them makes it easier to determine how community work can be a part of your professional life, even as you're transitioning between contexts.

FUTURES

Charlie

In graduate school, I spent a lot of time in an abandoned warehouse in Quincy, south of Boston. An old uniform factory, the building—with its precarious floors, creaky staircases, and suspicious odors—had been abandoned for some time. I was only able to discern its original use by digging through boxes of order forms, notes on uniform design, and other manufacturing debris. I gained access to the space through a fellow graduate student who had been tasked by the owner with keeping an eye on it.

The warehouse became a location of reciprocity, both a relatively stable place for writers to write outside of the precarity of the city and a research venue where I could collect data.

A quick excerpt from a fieldnote, during a session painting with MYND:

I have a head rush. The ventilation in this warehouse is nonexistent, and the amount of fumes and smoke—from various points of origin—is enough to choke someone. MYND yells from the other room, “Yo! Open the door. Are you trying to kill us?” I crack the warehouse door and find two old fans in the back room. One, the knob has broken off. Useless. The other works, so I set it up to blow fumes out. MYND ties his t-shirt around his face and pours water on it, crafting a makeshift gas mask.

Not exactly the most traditional representation of graduate education.

The warehouse no longer exists. The owner eventually sold the property and it was torn down to make way for future development—apartments, I think. The unrelenting gentrification of Boston and the surrounding areas marches on.

When Jess, Vani, Megan, and I started chatting, the warehouse seemed to inform, somehow, where I see, or hope to see, community-engaged work moving. At its core, community engagement always seemed to me the camp of our field most explicitly dedicated to spatial expansiveness, to cultivating more robust rhetorical landscapes within and beyond the academy, to pushing the boundaries of where writing (studies) is and what writing (studies) can do. Mathieu (2005) describes this as “a significant redrawing of geographic boundaries that define sites for composition teaching and research” (14). Indeed, recent work has only continued this tradition, exploding the “where” of the larger discipline in transformative and provocative ways.

But what is the work we need now? *Where* are we going?



MYND, Warehouse. Photo by Author.

From my perspective, today, some of the locations of engagement work might increasingly feel like the warehouse, community spaces betwixt and between, tactically hidden from the mainstream though no less rhetorically or politically meaningful. Do we all need to do graffiti and damage our lungs? No, of course not. But my hope is that we continue to articulate a willingness *to work where the work takes us*, sometimes into the interstices of public and community landscapes, in the gaps of what is considered “scholarship” to include research scenes like the one above, and to encourage our graduate students to do the same. Starting from this place of mobility, we might continue to expand our understandings—and pedagogies—of the diverse ways that communities use writing to shape, resist, or reshape the politics and powers of everyday life. This seems important, especially now.

Looking back on this warehouse from 1,200 miles away, from an office in Alabama, I’m not sure I’ve offered any conclusions here. But maybe that’s the point? The future of engagement will continue to mobilize in unpredictable ways, sensitive to the ever-shifting needs and goals of the communities we work with and the many institutional constraints of our work. Sometimes it will mean writing grants, and sometimes it will be looking for fans in an abandoned warehouse so that community members can keep writing.

Vani

Your question, “Do we all need to do graffiti and damage our lungs?” gets at a central tension. To what extent are we subject to the same risks as people who the field might term “community partners”? To what extent does school train us as researchers encouraged to understand ourselves as sharing these risks? Your question gets at the physical danger faced by those who write against the state, whether through graffiti or (thinking of my dissertation work on the Third World Women’s Alliance) anti-imperialist publications (the group’s FBI file was 100+ pages long).

If we know that writers are facing such physical danger, and we aren’t experiencing those threats as violently, what does it mean to do work in solidarity with those risks? I’m thinking of the political organizers I met in Syracuse who always emphasized how important it is to collectivize risk.

Jess

I'm struck by Charlie's phrase "community spaces betwixt and between, tactically hidden from the mainstream though no less rhetorically or politically meaningful." I'm interested in how disenfranchised communities organize and articulate their own identities—in other words, I think there is so much we can learn from the work communities are already doing and how they are responding to the world that happens largely outside of academia. I'd also love to see more scholarship about "where the work takes us," especially when that work is rooted in deeply material consequences and efforts. This is not only a spatial and geographic location but also perhaps the largely invisible work of grant applications, emails sent, time dedicated, and more. What would it mean to explore this materiality—and precariousness—of community work? This is exciting to me because it draws attention to the conditions that shape our labor and affect how we might sustain such work.

Megan

As I've been thinking about what's next both for community writing at large and my work specifically, I keep coming back to Paula Mathieu's evolving thoughts on tactical and strategic community engagement, as discussed in *Tactics of Hope* (2005) and "After Tactics" (in *Unsustainable*, 2013), and how we have to consider our engagement projects through both lenses (or as Charlie put it, consider when we are writing grants and when we are doing background work to allow community members to keep writing). We have to be strategic about how to take on a particular project considering the barriers we are often up against in this work, but we also must remain tactical in how we approach connecting with and meeting the needs of community members. As I set up structures for engaged projects at Trinity, I also consider how we can continue work with partners once an initial project ends (often with the end of a school semester). Sometimes this means thinking about how another class can take up this work—perhaps in the manner Seán McCarthy (2016) describes in "Designing an Engaged Swarm"—but it also involves considering other engagement programs on campus, research goals of faculty, and/or other community partners—all of whom might be suited for the next steps of a project. But what enables me to think tactically about individual partners and how Trinity can be a resource for them

are the structures I've built to keep up with the evolving needs and interests of all the people involved in this work.

I'm seeing this shift across the field of community writing as well. Through strategic initiatives like professional organizing (e.g., the new Coalition for Community Writing that has grown from the 2015 and 2017 Conference on Community Writing) and field-wide documents (e.g., the "CCCC Statement on Community-Engaged Projects in Rhetoric and Composition"), structures are growing that help scholars' individual community writing projects flourish by providing disciplinary guidance for overcoming institutional barriers.

As we move forward, we have to continue thinking about both the strategies and tactics we need to enable our own projects and to grow collectively as a field. How do we as individuals include community writing in our work, aligning it with the specifics of our positions while also reacting tactically to the needs of community members? And, in relation, how can we continue to create field-wide structures that push back against institutional constraints so that individual scholars can connect their writing research with communities beyond the academy?

Jess

Field-wide structures seem so important, particularly in how we make work visible and public. I think we need to continue working strategically to develop venues to produce, make public, and circulate the work that we find meaningful and exigent. Steve Parks and I edit a series through Parlor Press called "Working and Writing for Change" and it has allowed us to publish things that we might not otherwise be able to in a strictly academic sense, specifically publications about social justice with an expansive idea of what experiences might be represented (such as writing by Liliana Velasquez, a 14-year-old Guatemalan refugee; writing from a veterans group; stories of international students studying in the United States; how the CCCC caucuses emerged, etc).

I also think that we need to continue creating spaces with community members that represent the full view of community work (including the struggles, failures, and grant writing). In effect, while a finished

product is important, I'd like to see more of the material conditions that shaped the work. And, as already noted by Charlie, a lot of this work doesn't ever make it into tenure files. I think we need to continue to make visible the labor we do in the process and be mindful of making visible the labor that communities around us do (and have done) as well.

Vani

I'm heartened by work that aims to respond directly to the exigencies and needs of social movement organizing and critically interrogate our campus contexts. To reorient the lens of analysis on campus interrupts what Yanira Rodríguez always points out as a dynamic in which "the community" is assumed to not be "on campus." This includes the erasure of students/faculty of color in community literacy scholarship, where it is often assumed that "the work" happens with students of color off-campus, facilitated by white faculty or students. The campuses I've worked at have always been major local employers and also inhabited often-problematic roles in the local context (for example, SU was an active participant in gentrifying Syracuse but was registered as a nonprofit and did not pay taxes; the tuition is far too expensive for most local students to afford to go there).

Community literacy altered the course of my life by bringing me into communities of women, and women of color, before I began to read deeply in these intellectual-political-creative traditions, and before I even identified as a feminist. It linked literacy, education, and relationships for me and helped ground me in the sense that students' strongest work comes out of passion and embodied connection. It gave me a philosophy and skillset for multimodal and multigenre composition pedagogy before I knew those words existed. And yet, this work comes with all the contradictions of working within neoliberal capitalism. Ultimately, this work gave me a strong commitment to work against austerity measures and budget cuts in public education; participating in community literacy programs has always revealed to me the disinvestment from such programs in public schools. I also grew sensitive to the volunteer labor that often fuels this work; as Christine E. Ahn (2017) notes, many people in the United States are "seduced" by the idea that volunteerism can eradicate poverty.

I also grew cautious about the affective orientation that volunteers are encouraged to develop; as Sara Ahmed (2004) writes, “feeling good is not a sign that justice has been done.” Community literacy volunteer work can often involve the production of good feeling without necessarily including a commitment to dismantling the divisions that render campus/community distinct in the first place. The most meaningful work I’ve been a part of has often been deeply, viscerally uncomfortable—as if you feel yourself rearranging on the cellular level. Community organizing always involves some type of composition, but community literacy/community writing does not necessarily involve political organizing. I’d love to struggle through this tension with others.

Megan

I would love to see this link between community writing and political organizing become even more explicit. How can we make increasing equity for local communities a central goal of our projects, especially considering the limited resources with which many of us are working? Taking on projects that aim to to dismantle political and social structures is a much larger and more complex task than meeting specific needs identified by a community partner. What would need to change within our institutional and disciplinary contexts to allow for projects that specifically focus on increasing equity?

Jess

I’m struck by so much of what you all are saying about where community literacy/community engagement might be heading. I often wonder if the work I do is enough—if the result and impact of it is more than those feel-good moments. For instance, in my own work, the creation of print and digital archives of working-class writing *seems* significant. This represents a huge collaborative accomplishment for myself and the FWWCP/FED community who has been writing their history and sharing their class testimony for decades. But, is it enough? What happens if the archives aren’t used? What happens when—and this is very possible—funding for the project no longer exists, or the archival location is actually shut down (again, very possible with ongoing structural changes at London Metropolitan University)?

In effect, I am often thinking about the legacy of this work and how it can amount to more than a fleeting sense of accomplishment. To create an archive of working-class voices is meaningful to me, and to community members, because it challenges traditional notions of where we search for (and find) literacy, which communities are represented (in this case, working-class, immigrant communities), and how communities shape/enact/and change the very methods of engagement we use (here, archival curation). But... where do we go next? Does this change the intense class-based tensions that are ongoing in our country, as well as under Brexit? Not really.

So, what I think this work has taught me is the importance of mobilizing and organizing, as Vani noted before. No, I don't think an archive changes class structures or eradicates poverty. But I do think that this work has started a conversation that has developed into an archive that can be mobilized into a teaching tool for instructors and community members to talk about the importance of class and show how the FWWCP was a self-organized group of working-class writers that mobilized this network as a way to speak back to the institutional forces that diminished them. Teaching these histories is a necessary step in a move toward change.

What I see this work doing is drawing attention to stories and then discussing the need to create spaces for such work to develop in our community engagement histories, how we make our work public, and in our organizing efforts. First, I think continued forms of revisionist historiography (of bringing in new voices) are crucial to a broader sense of how marginalized communities have built power and resistance. I'm amazed at the important historiography work about community histories: the Sea Island Citizenship Schools (Lathan 2014; Schneider 2007), the Free School Association (Epps-Robertson 2015), Carlisle Indian Industrial School (Klotz 2017), Polish immigrants at the Ford English School (Portillo 2018), Third World Women's Alliance (Kannan 2018), Syrians for Truth and Justice (Parks and Alahmad n.d.). For me, these histories are eye-opening and need to be taught, remembered, and circulated.

Beyond teaching histories, I also think we need to continue organizing and building where we are. Recently, my Cultural Rhetorics class read Tamera Marko et al.'s (2015) article "Proyecto Carrito: When the Student Receives an A and the Worker Gets Fired". This gut-wrenching, moving piece describes how maintenance workers at Emerson College—many of them immigrants who fled from war, violence, and poverty—collaborated with Emerson students in a bilingual class and risked being fired. Now, the realities are that the workers might get deported. My class was left with: *what difference does academic publishing make if [workers are getting deported]?* You can fill this with too many examples of hate, violence, tragedy. As a writing program administrator, I've had to think about how such conversations might be part of first-year writing courses, and I've been able to include community literacy within the curriculum to encourage, programmatically, the importance of telling stories, of highlighting marginalized voices, and of acknowledging and respecting various types of literacies, knowledges, and abilities through the content we use in the classroom. This has led me to think that organizing and building begins at many levels with: curriculum choices; projects we choose; methods we use to make this work visible; and with how we involve communities and continue to value their knowledges.

CONCLUSION

Central to this dialogue is a shared belief in the importance of developing structures, principles, and values that shape community engagements. These structures account for our own emplacements and embodiments, as well as rhythms of the (often invisible) process of working with and in communities. Although all of us came to this work from various backgrounds, we all seem to rely on the hope that community engagement and community literacy work has a tangible effect on those around us. We support this hope with the practical and necessary steps of building alliances and finding our "coalitions of the willing" that can be part of creating a more humane environment. As we noted multiple times, we all do work that has roots in the idea of public writing—but, more than that, we see that this work needs to be deeply informed by community contexts, which are not only public but also politically significant and representative of the complex material conditions, social

relations, and economic factors within and beyond the academy. Although we each have our own encounters and transitions with community work, the future of this subfield seems to rest in the necessity of speaking back to destructive institutional (academic, governmental, political) forces through an articulation of values and the mobilization of people.

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