

# The Work of the Conference on Community Writing: Reflections on the 2019 Philadelphia Conference

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*This essay presents a polyvocal review of the 2019 Conference on Community Writing. It is composed of a series of vignettes and reflections written by the authors, community partners, conference organizers, educators, and others who attended the conference. Together, these reflections examine a central theme of the conference, “the work” of community writing, by attending to four questions: 1) What is the work of the Conference on Community Writing, and what does it tell us about the state of the subfield of community-engaged writing?; 2) What spaces does the conference encompass, and who is included in these spaces?; 3) What are the material realities that enable and constrain our work, in and beyond the conference?; and 4) What work is unfinished, and what will sustain us as we tackle it? The polyvocal essay presented here examines these questions through multiple positionalities within community writing studies, ultimately arguing that attending to the diversity of voices, stories, and perspectives in community writing must guide our efforts to understand community writing as a field and imagine its future work.*

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*“What do you do/say/chant/read/write to remind yourself that your job is NOT YOUR WORK?”*

—Carmen Kynard

*“I’m sick of academic arguments. I want stories.”*

—Paula Mathieu

*“How can we support others to have the courage to share their stories, especially in spaces where they are not represented?”*

—Michelle Angela Ortiz

Carmen Kynard, during her keynote address at the 2019 Conference on Community Writing (CCW), called on us in the audience to examine ourselves and the work we do, or fail to do, to address systemic racism and injustice. This social change *work* is not the “job,” the basic duties of our appointment. Nor is our work the “hustle,” the professional moves—shaped by white, neoliberal norms—that help us publish and network. Kynard challenged conference participants to distinguish the work, the job, and the hustle in order to remain oriented. “How do you self-check on your own consciousness when you get so deep into the hustle that you forget who you are and what you came here for?” Kynard asked. Her keynote (re)centered the work, and *how to do the work* was one of the fundamental questions that defined and shaped the third biennial Conference on Community Writing, hosted in Philadelphia by Drexel University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Temple University.

Another central question at the conference was how to talk about the work we do. During her keynote on the last day of the conference, Paula Mathieu asked participants to put aside academic argument in favor of stories. Mathieu underscored the importance of telling our narratives, of understanding our motivations, and of unpacking our positionalities relative to our work. Mathieu builds on the scholarship of Amy Robillard (2019), who asks that we all investigate our relationship to *story* “for your own understanding of why you do what you do” (xii). Muralist Michelle Angela Ortiz, whose keynote

addressed a standing-room-only crowd at the Free Public Library, told stories, and asked the audience to think more deeply about the relationship between story and power. Ortiz's collaborative public art features stories of migration, deportation, and detention, and it involves community members in creative action against harmful immigration policies. Ortiz's keynote focused on ways her work represents, in public spaces and visual forms, the stories of those whose voices are silenced—and she challenged CCW participants to attend to the politics of whose stories are heard.

In this reflective review of the 2019 Conference on Community Writing, we take these calls for stories seriously, unpacking a variety of interrelated yet disparate stories, woven together to try to help us understand *the work* of community writing. The four co-authors—Adam Hubrig, Heather Lindenman, Justin Lohr, and Rachael Shah—tell our stories from a range of positionalities, including, for example, rural and urban communities; tenure-line, lecturer, and graduate student appointments; different relationships to dis/ability and neurodiversity; and a variety of socioeconomic statuses. In other ways, our perspectives are limited; for example, we all experienced the conference as academics rather than community partners, we are all in the early stages of our careers, we all were born in the United States, and we are all white. In an effort to gather more perspectives, this review includes not only narrative-based vignettes from the four of us, but also vignettes and quotes from additional stakeholders who range from conference organizers to community member attendees.

We bring these perspectives together as a sort of kaleidoscopic lens through which to explore the following questions: What is the work of the Conference on Community Writing and what does it tell us about the state of the subfield of community-engaged writing? What spaces does the Conference on Community Writing encompass, and who is included in these spaces? What are the material realities that enable and constrain those who do the work of community writing? What work is unfinished, and what will sustain those of us who practice community writing as we tackle it? We respond to Mathieu's, Kynard's, and Ortiz's appeals to the writers, teachers, activists, and scholars who attended the third biennial Conference of Community Writing by sharing reflections on the work and ongoing challenges

of community writing. We argue that the polyvocality we present in this essay is at the heart of the Conference on Community Writing, and that carefully attending to differences in positionalities must guide our approach to understanding CCW and imagining the future work of the field. In these many voices, we as coauthors, as well as our many collaborators consider the work of community writing through our varying perspectives.

## **WHAT IS THE WORK OF THE CONFERENCE ON COMMUNITY WRITING AND WHAT DOES IT TELL US ABOUT THE STATE OF THE SUBFIELD OF COMMUNITY-ENGAGED WRITING?**

Conferences are usually seen as places to present on work that has been done. Community-engaged work, filled with false starts and messy relationships, happens in our home communities. Conferences tend to be for stepping outside the work for a moment, flying across the country, and projecting slides that look back on a project and render it consumable—while the real work waits back home. Conferences are for the hustle.

But the 2019 Conference on Community Writing explicitly tried to do work of its own—both in the field of Rhetoric and Composition and in the host city of Philadelphia. CCW attempted to build coalitions, create space for critical reflection, and disrupt common practices in the field. Beyond academia, the conference also facilitated a public art project with muralist and keynote speaker Michelle Angela Ortiz, and offered DeepThink Tanks, which are action-oriented working sessions co-facilitated by academics and local activists, on topics such as immigration, gentrification, and anti-racist practices. Below, the interplay of reflections of conference organizers and attendees hints at both the promise embedded in CCW's efforts to push against academic norms and the messy reality that comes with doing, and not just presenting, work.

*Veronica House, Conference Founding Director*

When we put out a call for the first [2015] Conference on Community Writing in Boulder, we crossed our fingers that people would come. My chair thought we might get forty people. We ended up having to cap registration at 350 people because we ran out of space. There were more people doing community-engaged writing than I ever imagined. We didn't know about each other and our work. Part of the goal of the conference is to serve as that connecting space. The first and second CCWs in Boulder highlighted a real desire for connection, for resources, for mentorship across universities. Some people felt isolated at their own institutions. I took Campus Compact's "engaged department" model and suggested, through the first conference's theme of "Building Engaged Infrastructure," that we conceive of writing and rhetoric as an engaged discipline. What would that mean in terms of our journals, our tenure and promotion expectations, our citation practices, and our mentorship and support for junior faculty and graduate students who do engaged work?

I kept hearing faculty say that they are doing engaged work *in spite of* a lack of support at their home institution or *in addition to* all of the other responsibilities they have. What if we could move around all of these potential barriers that can cause fatigue and burn out, and we could create a structure—that engaged infrastructure I was getting at with the inaugural conference theme—to make the work more sustaining and sustainable? Really, this would call for a shift in the field in terms of hiring and T&P practices, a shift in our journals in terms of what and who gets published and what counts as knowledge, in our book series, etc. That's what The Coalition for Community Writing now aims to do.

Our 2019 keynote speaker, Carmen Kynard, tells us not to mistake the job for *The Work*. CCW tries to help people in (and out of) the job in order to make the important work toward social change more doable, more recognized as valuable . . . and even if it isn't recognized at the home institution, to provide a space for people to share their work, be celebrated, appreciated, supported. To me, that's the joy of CCW.

*Paul Feigenbaum, editor of Community Literacy Journal and associate professor at Florida International University*

Being at this conference makes me feel like I am witnessing the work. However, as we endeavor to keep this work sustainable, which has included institutionalizing the CCW, I am also left wondering how we prevent the work from gradually morphing into another aspect of our jobs. Can this be prevented? Or can it just be delayed? If you institutionalize the work, does it inevitably become something else?

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*Rachael Shah*

Community Writing is hovering at the edge of disciplinarity, working to establish itself as a sub-discipline. I feel the tension as we take up the traditional markers of a subfield but seek to push back, even in subtle ways, against the norms.

Awards, for example, are often grounded in neoliberal, individualistic notions of competition. But the CCW Outstanding Book Award committee, when faced with three particularly strong monographs in the finalist round, gave the award to all three: Steve Alvarez's *Brokering Tareas: Mexican Immigrant Families Translanguaging Homework Literacies*, Patrick Berry's *Doing Time, Writing Lives: Refiguring Literacy and Higher Education in Prison*, and Candace Epps-Robertson's *Resisting Brown: Race, Literacy, and Citizenship in the Heart of Virginia*. Paula Mathieu, chair of the committee, highlighted how immigration, incarceration, and white supremacy are interlocking issues, and the three books are "awarded together as important books on resistance, response, critical awareness, and hope."

We work within the larger academic schema, and yet we try to change the rules in small ways. Perhaps the changes to the rules are too small. But perhaps they are a starting point.

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*Sherita Roundtree, Assistant Professor, Towson University*

As I listened to women of color around me breathe and release to the tenor of Professor Carmen Kynard's meditations, I understood that we must reckon with what it means to work in support of our communities and hold ourselves accountable. Community-engaged work is not only about collaboration, but it is also about taking self-inventory—as I have learned from Vani Kannan and Yanira Rodríguez. Beyond the thoughtful scholarship and presentations, CCW embodies these coalitional frameworks by challenging us to (re)evaluate our principles, identify our networks of support, and grapple with the varying levels of risk among us.

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*Carol Richardson McCullough, Community Writer from Writer's Room (community literacy arts program in partnership with Drexel University)*

Right before I began this reflection, I checked Instagram on my ever-present phone just like the young ones do today. There I saw pictured a gorgeous Michelle Ortiz installation newly opened today at Haverford College, in the Philadelphia suburbs. This collaborative artwork connects to her "Familias Separadas" public art project, amplifying the stories of families affected by detention and deportation in Pennsylvania. It encourages community members to examine their own thoughts and construct creative messages in response to families detained in the wake of US immigration policies. At the heart of the installation lies these words: "Nunca dejemos de luchar por lo que nuestro corazón anhela [Never stop fighting for what our heart yearns]."

Just last week Michelle traveled to Boston to introduce her work included in an exhibit at the Institute of Contemporary Art of twenty artists from around the world, illuminating stories of migration and home. After that, she hopped on a train to MIT to view another art exhibition in the realm of Poetic Justice. The week prior to that she joined us at home in Philly to share with the Conference on Community Writing a powerful keynote address highlighting her public art work affirming individuals and communities on a national and international scale. There she activated two vibrant murals at the Free Library

of Philadelphia, created for the occasion and augmented by panels designed by community members responding to the topic, *home*.

I was both humbled and amazed at the image of the little Black girl standing in her side yard by her house on the corner at the top of a hill long ago because that girl painted in shades of brown, gold, and earthen tones on the spectrum between those two colors, was me when I was about seven years old. The hands, showing the wrinkles of time's passage, are mine now, painted holding the snapshot while reflecting on my *Home*. Michelle Ortiz thinks big while never losing sight of the little people and the smaller details. She recognizes the importance of it all in the Big Picture.

Who knows where Michelle will be, or what she will be doing next week? But I do not doubt that on some level, it will be a continuation of *The Work* she has committed her energies and talents to doing, addressing profound issues while opening minds and sensitizing hearts through beautifully powerful images and the dialogue around them. She is bold, brave, and intentional. Her work is both prolific and profound. Her work, *The Work*, goes on. She never stops.

Once thought-filled people become inspired and encouraged, words can be put into action. Action can change the world if its actors are bold enough, brave enough, and intentional enough to never stop working towards the goal. Even though we had participants on the move through our City of Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection, from universities to museums to a center for neighborhood partnerships to a library through a parkway into a community and round-and-about again (sometimes running like Rocky through these streets), I hope we all gained inspiration through something we saw, felt, or experienced to emerge from the 2019 CCW in Philly, energized and recommitted to *never stop Doing the Work*.

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*Heather Lindenman*

There were times that writing seemed incidental to the conference and the goals that conference participants are trying to accomplish.





*HOME Mural: Michelle Angela Ortiz's mural of Carol Richardson McCullough, Heim Center, Free Library of Philadelphia, photographed October 17, 2019. The mural reads, in large print, "Home nurtures and strengthens us."*

Writing may be what brought us together, but it also was not the point. The point was the work. The writing is more or less central to that work, depending on the undertaking. In the Herstory Writing Project, and in Liliana Velasquez's memoir about crossing the border, writing is central because it is a means of conveying something important and turning it into a shared experience, to the extent that that's possible. Some of the other work people talked about could have been unrelated to a conference on writing: making sure Latinx and black residents are members of the boards of organizations. Advocating for the rights of undocumented children. Calling attention to the racism and injustice of Atatiana Jefferson's murder.

The study of writing—in all its many verbal, visual, and polyphonic forms—seemed less important at this conference than the praxis of leveraging writing toward a more tangible end.

## **WHAT SPACES DID THE CONFERENCE ON COMMUNITY WRITING ENCOMPASS, AND WHO WAS INCLUDED IN THESE SPACES?**

What happens when a conference goes out into the world? When it is no longer hermetically sealed within the bounds of a hotel or conference center and all the services catering to the conference clientele? Previous iterations of CCW were housed in the University Memorial Center at CU-Boulder, but this year's conference decentralized and embedded the work within the community. It was a powerful gesture, and, like any choice, it had multiple kinds of repercussions. Where we go and how we navigate a place marks us and reveals vital stories about who's inside, who's outside, who we have managed to consider, and who we have yet to welcome more fully.

This year's CCW was defined not only by extending the conference into the community, but also by bringing the community more fully into the conference. Community partners had a significant presence at this year's conference, leading workshops and DeepThink Tanks (participatory, action-oriented working sessions), and presenting keynotes. As successful as this initiative was, it was not without challenges, reminding us that the work of being more inclusive is ever-continuing.

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*Rachael Shah*

At the conference, I sat in the living room of the Dornsife Center for Neighborhood Partnerships, on a couch next to a fireplace, and asked Veronica House, "What does it mean that we are holding part of the conference *here*?" The Dornsife Center, located in a historically African-American neighborhood, hosts programming that ranges from community dinners, to side-by-side courses that involve residents and Drexel students, to community lawyering clinics.

My first national community engagement conference occurred in a different kind of place. I have a memory of sitting in a hotel ballroom, chandeliers overhead, while a young man of color spooned dressing over my salad. In the front of the room, a white academic

was being honored for her work with engagement. I remember a thick sense of unease settling over my chest. I had maxed out my graduate student budget to pay for registration and flew across the country to a conference where I didn't know anyone personally—even as the nametags matched my comprehensive exam reading lists. CCW did not yet exist to bring together people at the intersection of community engagement and writing studies, and I was trying to find a disciplinary home. So, I wandered hotel hallways, tucked drink tickets into my business cards for safekeeping, and reflected on the spatial rhetoric of the rooms where we met. And honestly, I have to think hard to remember which city I was in.

CCW attempted to create a different environment and engage more intentionally with Philadelphia. On Friday, we walked from the conference hotel to the Dornsife Center, noticing the sidewalks become more uneven as we moved into the vibrant neighborhood of Mantua. The quietly swanky hotel we left behind, The Study, took its theme seriously: a sculpture of a pair of glasses sat out front, and each room featured a cup of sharpened pencils.

The conference's move from "The Study" to a neighborhood center was an explicit metaphor for what Community Writing hopes to accomplish, how we seek to shift the locations of knowledge production. Scholars like Linda Flower have argued for methods to center on community expertise and find the "story behind the story" on civic issues. Ellen Cushman, Juan Guerra, and Steve Parks have called on our field to decenter whiteness and recognize more diverse forms of knowledge production; scholars in community publishing emphasize the importance of telling and making history in collaboration with marginalized communities (Keubrich 2012); and John Saltmarsh, Patti Clayton, and Matthew Hartley have argued against academia's delegitimization of community knowledges. The conference is attempting to encourage this shift. The call for workshops asked that community partners be co-presenters and conference registration for community partners was free. The featured speakers included muralist Michelle Angela Ortiz and the young Guatemalan author Liliana Velasquez, in addition to scholars like Carmen Kynard and Paula Mathieu. And Kynard and Mathieu both honored knowledges traditionally excluded from academia,

from knowledge of black pop culture to contemplative practices. The DeepThink Tanks encouraged participants to consider activist work as knowledge work, such as the DeepThink Tank that local black activists hosted at The Dornslife Center to examine gentrification.

But the shift in the locations of knowledge production is far from complete. This shift has implications for who we cite, who we publish, who we honor in our theoretical lineage, and who has a say in our program designs. The move from The Study to the Dornslife Center is not a natural one, given the norms of academia, nor an easy one. And even in attempts to make the shift, there are those who will get lost or be excluded.

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*Justin Lohr*

In 2017, community partners felt like a novelty. But at this year's conference, made more accessible by its location in a major metropolitan area, community partners were ordinary—in the best possible way. Voices in our field have long warned us about the “dangerous territory” (Stoecker and Tryon 2009) we tread upon when we do not fully include community voices in our work. But maybe the composition of the conference this year can give us hope—evidence of a shifting tide at the conference itself, and an image for our field at large to work toward in terms of who we include at our own ever-growing table. CCW is actively seeking out community voices by offering free registration to community partners. Our work is reciprocal and polyphonic, and more than any other year, the CCW in 2019 seemed to capture these qualities and call for the field to reflect them as well.

This centrality of community partners crystallized for me during the DeepThink Tank at the UPenn Kelly Writer's House. Andres Celin of Youth United for Change detailed high school students using their training in speech writing to make themselves heard before the council of the sixth-largest city in the country in order to bring free clean water to Philadelphia high schools. Sarah Zeller-Berkman presented her work with the ChangeFocusNYC project, which gathered stories about how young people navigate New York's government agencies.

And Christin Rosario Tucker of Mighty Writers spoke of the challenges and successes of providing mentorship for young women at a pivotal stage in their lives.

In this DeepThink Tank on UPenn's campus, in a physical space that seemed distinctly scholarly and elite, I saw three community partners take center stage. The "scholars" in the room, never as far from Ivory Tower elitism as we would like, were the ones listening, shut up by the work of those doing the work. It was moving to see this space transformed into a stage for collaborations across difference, for bodies and issues that previously would not have been given much attention in such places.

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*Tia Van Hester, Afrofuturist Feminist and Director of Global Engagement at Monmouth College, at the CCW Writers in Residence Presentation*

By writing stories with our bodies in space, we change the game.

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*Adam Hubrig*

Diversifying the field of community writing, Iris Ruiz reminded us at the Editor's Roundtable, requires not only a diversity of bodies, but also a diversity of knowledge, methodologies, and epistemologies. Sherri Craig, who organized the roundtable with Don Unger, pointed to the emerging conversations in the field about the politics of citation, conversations which were *not* happening in the field even a few years ago and are, as Donnie Johnson Sackey noted, the result of on-the-ground efforts of teachers, researchers, and community partners to open up spaces for dialogue.

Steve Parks added to these ideas, critiquing the silo-ing of *non-whitestream* approaches: book series cannot simply print a single book by a person of color and assume their "diversity" work is completed—instead these conversations should be represented and

present throughout multiple projects. And, Parks added, white people must educate themselves as to what they don't know, not to expect people of color to do more labor.

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*Heather Lindenman*

There were moments when we felt like a community. The shared clap to activate the mural in the public library joined those present in something greater than ourselves. I felt the collectivity of urgency most keenly at Carmen Kynard's keynote, at Liliana Velasquez's reading, upon hearing Eli Goldblatt's words about how outrage, surprise, and joy drive our work while surrounded by skeletal dinosaurs, a strange oasis from a windy night in Philly.

But then there were the moments where we were not yet the people we purport to be. I showed up a few minutes late to a session featuring five community partners, invited to share their expertise with us academics. The speakers included Latinx community advocates; two documentarians; a first-generation, Latinx college student; and a recent graduate. One of the presenters, also the head coach of a soccer team, had to find a substitute to coach his team in a tournament that day so that he could attend our conference. When I and one other conference attendee arrived, the presenters were packing up to leave because no one else had come to their session.

They stayed, and here's what they shared: stories of what it's like to be a first-generation college student and a person of color entering a PWI; stories of racism, where a local Latinx leader was appointed to the board of a local nonprofit, but then told not to talk; stories of ageism, where a nontraditional college student applied to a job and was told "we're looking for college students." They shared ideas for responding, ideas grounded in deep knowledge of a community: run for school board. Advocate for more equal access to high-quality education. Get to know people from different political backgrounds by finding shared passions—by actually talking before and after the kids' soccer game. Chronicle inspirational stories on YouTube in a way that gives hope to people who don't have much hope. Their stories demonstrated ways that "irresponsible writing," to use one

speaker's words, can inadvertently harm community development; their experiences with activism demonstrated the complexities of engaging heterogeneous immigrant groups in community building.

In our discussion of community organization, one community leader explained: "welcome" is not as simple as claiming to welcome all, as in a church. One can write "All are welcome" on the sign, but what happens once everyone is inside? Do people greet them?

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## **WHAT ARE THE MATERIAL REALITIES THAT ENABLE AND CONSTRAIN OUR WORK, IN AND BEYOND THE CONFERENCE?**

None of this happens in a vacuum—not the work, not the conference. Yet, what we present and write about frequently omits the material realities that shape the work and mediate our relationship to it. Our bodies, our commitments, our efforts just to pay for any of this to happen—these are defining features of our lives and our work, but function in our scholarship as an absent parallel narrative. What might happen, though, if we gave full voice to this narrative? How might it help the work? Help us as the ones who do it?

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*Adam Hubrig*

On Thursday, at the Kelly Writers House, the DeepThink Tank facilitators gave participants instructions to position themselves in the room based on the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement "All education should center on civic engagement." Those who were in full agreement stood at the front of the room, those who disagreed at the back, and those somewhere in between found spots in between to mark their positions accordingly.

Unable to navigate the busy space and quick movement with my cane, I remained at my seat, reflected on the question, and observed participants: Attendees shuffled from their seats, their feet doing the

calculus of where they stood—in the room and on the issue. The group ended up being fairly scattered.

Once our bodies had settled, we engaged in conversation about why we each stood where we did. One participant in the think tank pointed out that while her goals might be political literacies and civic engagement, her students' goals were often focused on other concerns, like earning their GED. Another participant shared the stark realities of material conditions that might make students feel distant from political action or too busy to engage.

How do we recognize and push back against the material barriers to the work? How can we address the failures of entire systems that push people of color, queer folk, disabled and otherwise marginalized body-minds away and disempower them? I need to better interrogate how my own positionality, especially my whiteness, shapes how I see these issues, and I hope others will do the same to collectively provide better access.

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*Justin Lohr*

We need a *techne* for making the work seen. The work before the work begins, that is. The iceberg labor. How do we articulate the mass beneath the surface? In a language that speaks to colleagues, chairs, college and university administrators? Where is the *techne* that helps us say that this work is as valuable as that work?

Work that occurs out of bounds too often goes invisible. For Jessica Pauszek, this means the labor of grant application after grant application—the \$200 plus the \$300 plus the \$300 plus the \$350 that makes the work possible. In a recent article, she wanted to itemize every grant as a way of saying, “this project is a project of precarity.” We need the stories of precarity, she tells me, because they open doors to inquiry and finding more ways to do the work strategically. She explains that our methods sections need to make visible the invisible, the sometimes-threadbare patchwork of grants and emails and permissions on which the work relies, a patchwork that is rarely



as far from unraveling as we would like. We need to talk about the failures.

“I’m thinking of all the stories,” she says, “we aren’t telling when we only tell stories of success.”

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*Allen Brizee, Faculty Director for Community-Engaged Learning and Scholarship and Associate Professor of Writing, Loyola University Maryland*

We must continue to be honest about our failures, because we can learn so much from them. In reflecting on and studying our failures, we should use multiple measures—narrative, holistic, qualitative, quantitative—in assessing our outcomes and impacts. Using these approaches is important for tracking our work because in civic engagement, it’s not a matter of *if* we will fail, it’s a matter of *when* we will fail. And we need to learn how to fail with grace and resilience so that we can, if appropriate, continue to work with our students, our colleagues, and our community partners.

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*Rachael Shah*

People I know at the conference ask about the Husker Writers program I’ve been involved with, and I have to tell them: it’s looking like the funds won’t be coming through this year. I submitted one last Hail Mary major grant application the week before my first child was due, and while we made it to the final round, we didn’t get the award. The three canceled meetings and unanswered emails from the person who controls our backup funds seem to constitute what I’ve learned to identify as a “Nebraska No.” I’ve faced these kinds of walls before, and I’ve always found ways to build a jerry-rigged solution—but never while holding an infant on one arm.

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*Justin Lohr*

I arrive at the conference carrying a half-dozen rhetorical analyses and research review articles in my backpack; dozens more are a few blocks away in the trunk of my car. They are all due back soon. Unlike the two previous iterations of this conference, which offered actual *trips* to Boulder, this is something much closer to commuting, which makes it that much harder to bound this off from everything at home. From a pregnant spouse who I won't sleep beside for the first time in over two years. From anxieties about whether I'll get parental leave. From an impending appointment with the rheumatologist, where I'll find out what stories my bloodwork is telling.

I imagine that most everyone at this conference carries even more than I do. Untamed lives to match our untamed work—work that continues to struggle against the confines of academic norms, that defies the 9-to-5 and 40 hours per week. That regularly spills into and complicates our “other” lives, our “other” relationships. But these lives beyond the work rarely, if ever, occupy center stage—in our presentations or in our publications. There are certain things we only talk about in the margins of a conference, at the happy hour or over the informal coffee. As entwined as they are with the work, our lives beyond the work remain at best the parenthetical, the footnote, the bit of humor that precedes the “real stuff” of a talk. Even though the two vitally inform and often constrain and complicate each other, we almost never discuss both narratives together. There are some exceptions to this, and the CCW at times seems to be one, but we need more.

Life is a mess. The work is, too—often in the best possible way. We need stories that capture the mess.

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*Heather Lindenman*

Liliana Velasquez, who read an excerpt from her memoir for a packed room of conference participants, fled Guatemala for the United States when she was fourteen years old. Her story of escaping violence, attempted rapes, and robberies is horrifying. Yet tens of thousands

of children annually who flee their home countries for the US all have their own stories to tell, many like Liliana's.

What does it mean for undocumented people to tell their stories? Velasquez, author of *Dreams and Nightmares/Sueños y Pesadillas*, and Mark Lyons, her translator and editor, met forty-five times. Mark was concerned these meetings were taking too much time away from Liliana's schoolwork. "Telling this story is saving my life," Velasquez said.

And yet. "This may not be a good time to write undocumented stories," assistant professor and DeepThink Tank co-facilitator Sara Alvarez said. "Students should not *have to* write their stories to relive their trauma."

"For an undocumented person, coming out is a big deal," said undocumented activist and co-facilitator Angie Kim. "That should be done in their own time. Not everyone wants to advocate. That's a very big thing. It's exhausting."

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## WHAT WORK IS UNFINISHED, AND WHAT WILL SUSTAIN US AS WE TACKLE IT?

In his CCW retirement celebration, Eli Goldblatt identified the three driving factors in his years of engagement with community writing: outrage, surprise, and joy. Many of us are driven to do this work because of our outrage with injustices both within and beyond the academy, injustices that seem so pervasive it's difficult not to feel powerless in their shadows. Sometimes, in our outrage, we collectively find the courage to face those injustices.

What work is still to be done, in collaborating with communities and altering academic structures? How might community writing attend to and accommodate the individual people, and their various positionalities, who are doing this work? How might we understand

the range of positionalities in doing this work but also the full range of limitations to it and inspirations for it?

Amidst the injustices and gaps, we find flashes of hope, often in surprising moments when relationships matter more than what we “ought” to be doing. At times, in those spaces where we honor the difficult, always-unfinished work, there are moments of joy.

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*Justin Lohr*

“In twenty-five years of community writing,” Jeff Grabill explained, “we still can’t escape our own disciplinarity.” Grabill, along with Dawn Opel, Sean McCarthy, and Erik Skogsberg, spent Thursday morning questioning, it seemed, all the boundaries: the boundaries of “medieval” academic departments, the humanistic obsession with texts rather than actual humans, and the need for work that spills beyond the boundaries.

The conversation centered around the concept of innovation, and I must admit that part of me balked at the word. It is so often associated with developing widgets or streamlining their delivery. And yet, the panel asked, does it have to be such a noxious word? After all, as Sean McCarthy reminded us, “innovation is fundamentally a liberal art. It goes back to inquiry, and universities might be the only spaces left for inquiry.”

We need spaces between and beyond departments. We need unbounded sprawl to make places for social innovation. But, to reclaim innovation, the presenters argued, we will also need to innovate our departments and push against the humanistic obsession with texts and lonely authors. Can we buck the emphasis on the creative individual in an age when so much cultural creation and social action is collective and collaborative? Can we, at the same time, also defy the hermetic sealing of knowledge in order to build courses and projects that fuse humanities with social sciences with digital design with whatever else to truly do the work that needs to be done?

Our home departments, faced with declining enrollments and diminishing cultural belief in the value of humanistic education, desperately need innovation. Figuring out how to become a more collective, encompassing, inclusive humanities might just be the innovation that we need. After all, as Jeff Grabill put it, “the humanities would probably be much more interesting if it spent more time with humans.”

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*Dominic DelliCarpini, Professor of Writing Studies and Dean of the Center for Community Engagement, York College of Pennsylvania, in Grant Writing Workshop:*

It's human work.

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*Sherri Craig*

If you've met me, then you know. In the brief time since I threw off the shackles of graduate school and realized that the shackles only changed shape, size, position, and visibility, I have become more of a burn the whole ship kind of person. Being just three semesters into my first tenure stream position should make me concerned about image, behavior, saying the right cis-het white oppressive comments that will allow me entry into the cis-het white protected ivory tower of tenure and complacency. However, in the face of this reality, I have become a “burn the whole ship” junior scholar, and my first time attendance at the 2019 Coalition on Community Writing Conference confirmed my emerging identity.

In the middle of my roundtable discussion, “How Editors Can Build Solidarity and Help Change Scholarly Publishing in Writing, Rhetoric & Literacy Studies,” during a discussion of publication practices in rhetoric and composition, inspired by my colleagues in arms at CCW 2019, I declared, “we need to burn the whole damn ship.” I believed it. I believe it. My “burn the whole ship” somewhat alludes to *Clotilda*, the last known ship carrying enslaved people, that was burned in the Mobile Bay in 1860 by slavers who set fire to the

vessel to hide evidence of their horrors and misdeeds, as it was illegal to participate in the slave trade at that time. Despite the power of this image, my identity description actually takes up the historical resistance aboard *Adventure* and *La Amistad* where collections of enslaved persons recognized the power of the collective, rose up, and overcame their oppressors, sometimes with fire. The enslaved persons determined enough was enough, despite exhaustion, starvation, inhuman conditions, and fear of retribution. Our ship has gone to rot and we need to burn it down because this young Black scholar has had enough. In only three semesters at a university just twenty miles from the CCW host institutions, I had enough of the job. I need to remember the work.

Dr. Carmen Kynard reminds us in her 2019 keynote that we must separate the job from the work from the hustle. Such gleaning could help remember the work. The work of engaging with communities that are like mine. The work of laughing with students in my office late into the evening. The work of challenging hiring practices that demonstrate a preference for “fit, nice, and collegial” and other coded language that just means compliant and quiet. The work of supporting the vision of *Spark*, a new open-access writing studies journal. The work of publishing in spaces that value resistance. The work of saying, “This. Is. Enough.”

The Conference on Community Writing provoked us to consider the need for the work. The conference was engaging and there were many important and worthwhile conversations. I left inspired, surrounded and supported by a sea of women of color. I hold onto the energy like a lit match.

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*Aja Martinez, Assistant Professor, Syracuse University*

I am continually bolstered by the words and work of Carmen Kynard. Carmen makes me brave in my own pursuits of justice and elevating of the voices of those who this job tries to bury. Carmen’s keynote reminded me there is coalition and solidarity amongst a small, yet fierce few in this field, and I was happy to be counted amongst those who were lucky enough to be inspired by her words.

*Rachael Shah*

At Carmen Kynard's keynote, a memory returns to me. I am walking back from new faculty orientation, where the dean has just given a presentation about his vision to "tighten the screws of tenure." Scholars across the country should know our names, he insisted. Feeling sick, I call my mentor, Adela Licon, looking, I think, for reassurance—or maybe an exit plan.

But the first thing she says, her voice coming strong over my phone speaker, is "f\*\* that neoliberal bullsh\*\*t!" She goes on to remind me why I had taken this position: the graduate students who started their own community literacy organization, the opportunities to help white teachers grapple with critical race theory, the thriving youth poetry slam network. In my work, it's more important that the high school teachers down the street know my name.

Kynard's talk gives me a vocabulary for the lesson Adela was teaching me: she was teaching me to separate the hustle from the work, and to see the hustle for what it is. It is easy to get lost in the job and the hustle. Helping others stay oriented, supporting others to do the work, is important work itself.

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*Adam Hubrig*

As the air cooled and the sun began to set, I wandered Philadelphia's sidewalks, lost. Unsteady on my feet, I searched for a curb cut so as not to fall in the street. Finding none, a stranger kindly offered an arm. I shifted my weight onto my cane and then onto the street. Through the course of the long day, my phone's battery had dwindled and I was trying to find my way to the library on streets I'd never heard of under an unfamiliar city skyline.

The stranger helping me down the curb noticed before I did: I was bleeding through my shirt. The extra walking had upset a long-standing abdominal wound, which had begun to bleed through the

bandages. It was more embarrassing than painful, and I decided to skip the event and look for my hotel. As I reflect on the situation, I *know* any number of my colleagues would have been happy to help. But sometimes the difficulty of disability is how difficult it is to ask for help, to even accept the kind arm of the stranger helping me down the curb.

Later in the week, after the very last event of the conference, I missed the shuttle back to the hotel. I was going to begin walking back. Eli Goldblatt noticed I was about to head back, and asked Steve Parks if he would mind dropping me off back at the hotel. As I approached the car, Eli lent me an arm to get down off the curb. I appreciate this act of kindness—both from the stranger on the first night and Eli on the last—and wonder if maybe this is part of doing the work, too: of being open to how we might enable access without people having to go through the awkwardness of *asking* for access.

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*Eli Goldblatt, Professor of English at Temple University, in his retirement tribute at CCW:*

So much of this work is about listening.

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*Rachael Shah*

Elenore Long and I are walking across the uneven sidewalks from the Dornsife Center when she asks me about a trio of graduate students from my program whom she met years ago. I don't know what to say, exactly, so I just sigh and tell her, "one of them committed suicide last month."

We stop walking a moment.

It's difficult, but as we slowly begin to walk again, I tell the story. I tell Ellie about this young woman, Katie, who was full of light and deeply committed to the adjudicated youth she worked with for years. Her genuine investment in the graduate-run community literacy



organization she founded played a key role in recruiting me to Nebraska. She was brilliant and capable. In her first year at a tenure-track job, she started several initiatives. A book project on collaborations with dual enrollment teachers at local schools is now left incomplete.

Telling this story to Ellie is a strangely raw moment for an academic conference. And I wonder how often the hustle allowed Katie to be raw. She was required to embody a professional persona of composure, confidence, *answers*—even while bearing the pressures of life as a new, untenured WPA, uprooted from her support system. Our job market requires this movement, this isolation, and treats it as normal—even though it is so far from normal. I can never pretend to know what caused Katie’s death, but I do know that the expectation that we prioritize our jobs that above all things is dangerous.

Ellie is silent for a moment, and then says with quiet conviction that this suicide holds our field accountable.

In her absence, Katie leaves behind unfinished work.

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*Adam Hubrig*

The hustle is so damn exhausting. As a graduate student, I feel a pressure to market myself in every room I enter. As someone who is mobility-impaired, that entering is so much extra work. Being autistic, I’d sometimes rather not enter *at all*. I’m tired.

Even with all the hustling, there are no guarantees. I think about my friend, Katie, who committed suicide earlier this fall. The last time we spoke, she was giving me advice on the hustle: my cover letter, phone interviews. But even having the job didn’t make it easier for her.

I remember seeing Katie at her happiest when working with high school students who had been in and out of juvenile justice programs, when welcoming graduate students like me into partnerships she had built. Katie *shined* when she did the work.

I've met others at CCW who shine—like Katie—when they do this work. I talk with a couple of undergraduate students who do engaged work, telling them about the graduate program I'm in and suggesting they apply, offering to help with application materials.

Back in my hotel room, a few hours later, I slumped in a chair, horrified that I may have set them on a similar path of exhaustion. I think about what graduate school has *cost*, not just in terms of money, but time away from family, implications for physical and mental health.

But then I think about the shining; I think about Katie at her happiest. I think about revising scholarship applications with refugees from Myanmar late into the night and a hundred other moments of work I've been involved in *because* of Katie.

If they decide it's the right fit for them, I want them to have those opportunities to shine, too.

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*“Seguimos Caminando” (“We Keep Walking”) is a series of animated images created by keynote presenter and muralist Michelle Angela Ortiz and projected on the gates of the Philadelphia City Hall. Based on stories from detained mothers, it began with questions:*

1. What gives you strength in moments of darkness?
  2. What makes you feel most free?
  3. What do you hope for you?
  4. What do you hope for your child?
- 

*Justin Lohr*

It's a red brick building. My alma mater owns it now, but in 2007, it was still used by Breakthrough of Greater Philadelphia. My conference ends on a bench outside this building. It is the place I began this sort of work, teaching afternoon enrichment classes.

I listen to the bricks for a bit. Some of what I hear makes me wince—there are always painful missteps in working across difference. It's now obvious to me why the Edgar Allan Poe curriculum in those enrichment classes resonated less than Self-Discovery through Creative Writing, the latter about articulating oneself into being. I can't remember many specifics now. There may have been a lesson plan that involved listening to the Fugees. But much of what I hear inspires gratitude in me.

As I sit here, it becomes clear to me why I entered into this kind of work. It was because of my experiences in this building, my first steps into a world something like community writing as a college student who, each week, learned as much from the students he worked with as they did from him—and often more.

That I can do this work fills me with more gratitude than I have words for. The work demands a great deal, but there's a reason we keep at it. It sustains us in a way other work does not.

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There is much work to be done—in the field, on our campuses, in our home communities, and within and through the Coalition for Community Writing. As we look forward to 2021, when the fourth biennial CCW will be held in Washington DC, we are reminded of the need to talk with each other, tell each other stories not only about our job and our hustle, but also about our work: the prison writing workshop that inspires, the healthcare collaborative that hasn't gotten off the ground, the dynamic substance abuse writing group, the grant that we can't seem to get funded. The stories and reflections in this article are one gesture toward that goal. Stories, when told well, lead us back to the work.

We end on one final insight from undocumented activist Angie Kim, co-facilitator at the “Our Struggle, Our Joy: Immigrant Activism, Storysharing, and Community Building” workshop: “For me, when a person shares a story, whether we read them in a book or meet them in person, stories are supposed to inspire. But inspire what? To do something.”

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