

Intersectional Community Thinking : New Possibilities for Thinking About Community

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The research in the area of community literacy has flourished along the lines of activist and curricular work. The field explores these lines in journals such as *Reflections* and *Community Literacy Journal*, a bi-annual conference *The Conference on Community Writing*, and with the formation of a non-profit professional society *The Coalition of Community Writing*. It has been nearly ten years since Ellen Cushman and Jeffrey T. Grabill published their special issue on “Writing Theories: Changing Communities” in *Reflections*. In the introduction, Cushman and Grabill called for attention to the use of “community,” especially in these activist and curricular areas, a question we wish to pursue further now.

Reflections has grown, like much of the field, in its understanding of what community writing means, with a special focus on the activist thread of community engaged writing. However, the field has not yet truly

addressed what the formulation of “community” as it currently stands may elide, and *Reflections*, with its emphasis on activism, is well-poised to tackle this. Essentially, we propose that the use of the word community is deeply entangled with notions of publics and counterpublics, and with them civic and democratic discourse. To introduce intersectionality as an additional or alternative way of thinking about communities could be useful for the discussions of power and the creation of difference. It gives the field of community writing a new way of thinking about community as a term, and through that, new ways of discussing community writing.

Here, we would like to challenge the field to grow to include new ways of articulating community relationships through intersectional ways of thinking. Of course, in our resistance to binary understandings of community, we want to emphasize that communities, publics, and intersectionality are not separate or opposed understandings. Instead, all communities help us understand and form relationships—and all relationships help us understand our sense of community. A deeper usage and understanding of intersectionality in community writing presents an opportunity to unearth how discussions of power, senses of belonging, and erasures of intra-community difference within communities shape their writing practices.

Moving away from binarisms and toward new understandings of community would be a powerful shift toward a new way of thinking about community writing. While Cushman and Grabill first put this forward a decade ago, it seems now is the kairotic moment for this work. Scholars picked up that article more in the latter part of the decade than when it was first published, with many noting the way Cushman and Grabill discuss civic engagement in particular (Brizee 2019; Dorpenyo 2019; Brizee and Wells 2016). While answering their call for civically-oriented work, the field must also respond to their call for new understandings of the field—expanding not just to new sites of research for activist work but also to new ways of thinking about community. These expansions have also been reflected in the title changes to the journal of *Reflections* itself.

Reflections has undergone a number of name changes through the years. In 2004, it was *Reflections: A Journal of Writing, Service*

Learning, and Community Literacy, reflecting the connections in the field between these three ideas. In 2012, alongside shifts in the field's interests, the journal changed its name to *Reflections: Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing, and Service Learning*. Now, its title is *Reflections: A Journal of Community Engaged Writing and Rhetoric*. This arc of name changes reflects the arc of the field. While community-oriented work in rhetoric and composition has seen the rise of discussions on civic writing, public rhetoric, and service learning, they all came to what we might envision as our shared scholarly home: our community that studies writing about communities.

Two strands of work stand out as particularly durable within the field over the last two decades: service learning and other forms of curricular innovation, and activist research with communities inside and beyond the college classroom. These lines of scholarship reflect core ideals and a shared investment in observing and negotiating power dynamics in community-based literacy practices (Branch 2007; DeGenaro 2007; Duffy 2007; Hogg 2006; Lathan 2015; Lindquist 2002; Mathieu, Parks, Rousculp 2012; Powell 2009 and 2015; Sheridan-Rabideau 2008; Webb-Saunderhaus and Donehower 2015), in teaching and creating knowledge with people representing multiple perspectives (Deans 2000; Feigenbaum 2015; Flower 2008; Flower, Long, and Higgins 2006; Goldblatt 2005; Guinsatao-Monberg 2009), and in the pedagogical and ethical practices guiding these ideals (Baca 2012; Canagarajah 2013; Davis and Rosswell 2013; Hull and Shultz 2002; Jacobi 2018; Rose and Weiser 2010; Rousculp 2014). *Reflections* has significant investments in activist, field-based understandings of community engaged writing, particularly (though not exclusively) in the past few years through studies of prison writing (Hinshaw and Jacobi 2019; Kells 2015; *Reflections* 19.1 2019), community writing in Latinx (Bloom-Pojar, Anderson, and Pilloff 2018; Guzmán 2018/2019; Montgomery and O'Neil 2017; Villa and Figuero 2017;) and Black communities (Athon 2015; Browdy 2017/2018; Pruce 2017/2018) and service learning (Druschke, Bolinder, Pittendrigh, Rai 2015; Guler and Goksel 2017; O'Connor 2017; Phelps-Hillen 2017; Lietz and Tunney 2015; Lindenman and Lohr 2018; Shumake and Shah 2017; Wells 2016). Since so many of these works are invested in community writing practices and understanding the ways those are entangled in power dynamics, intersectionality feels like a natural extension of the work in the field.

While we recognize that, at times, there needs to be scholarship that is focused on the formations of groups via a public framework, intersectional community thinking can focus instead on ideas like intra-group difference and power dynamics, the roles of individuals in community formation, and the experiences of the multiply marginalized within communities that do not share their multiple marginalization. Many scholars already show significant interest in these ideas, and adding new hermeneutics of thinking about them in addition to the public turn in composition may help us better describe these areas of interest.

The current scholarship's engagement of intersectionality can also help us think more deeply about Cushman and Grabill's point on what the use of the word community may be leaving out, which hints at the same critiques. How could an intersectional way of thinking complicate our understanding of what a community is? Community, and community engaged writing, has long been entangled with notions of "the public" and of service. What do these entanglements lend us? And can untangling allow us to more adeptly discuss overlaps of race, gender, sexuality, and indigeneity across communities and within them? In common usage, intersectionality stands in for "multiply oppressed," but the field of community writing could gain deeper insights by returning to Kimberlé Crenshaw's nuance, as theorists of intersectionality do.

We use intersectionality as Crenshaw first defined the term. She notes in "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,"

The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences...when the practices expound identity as woman or person of color as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling. (1991, 1242)

Crenshaw and other scholars have been using this term as a form of inquiry for nearly thirty years, including methodological debates around its usage. Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall

note in their introduction to the *Signs* special issue on intersectionality (2013) that “the future of intersectionality studies will thus, we argue, be dependent on the rigor with which scholars harness the most effective tools of their trade to illuminate how intersecting axes of power and inequality operate to our collective and individual disadvantage” (795). This is the essence of intersectionality as a way of thinking—it moves from an analysis of identity to an analysis of how identity is entwined with structures of power, and how those structures of power might differently affect those who experience difference within difference (Osborne 2020).

Crenshaw uses intersectionality as a way of articulating differences in identity to claim empowerment, and a way of articulating the experiences of group members when there is intra-group difference. Notably, what Crenshaw wants to emphasize is that intersectionality understands that, for instance, a Black woman does not just experience racism like Black men and misogyny like white women. Instead, a Black woman faces intersectional racism and sexism, which may look or function differently. This can lead to erasure of the racism and misogyny that Black women specifically, or other people with multiple marginalized identities, face. Discourses of the public and the community can be strengthened with a fuller understanding of Crenshaw’s term intersectionality.¹

It is about acknowledging that oppressions for multiply-marginalized people are sometimes different from but no less valid than the oppressions of others in their community who do not share their multiple marginalizations. It is also about difference as potential for liberation—that is where intersectional thinking in community writing could be most powerful. How does an intersectionality in community writing allow greater potential for empowerment through writing?²

INTERSECTIONALITY IN *REFLECTIONS*

Some scholars have already been doing this kind of work in *Reflections*. They can help guide us into models of inquiry that take into account the ways communities may face multiple and interlocking oppressions like misogynoir (Bailey 2010), give us ways of discussing difference

even within community groups, and help us better understand the complex ways community writing can play into group identities.

One instance of intersectional frameworks being used in the journal ties into *Reflections'* significant interest in prison literacy, which has long been a part of the journal, and is often informed by feminist and LGBTQ activist stances (Hinshaw and Jacobi 2019). In a special issue on prison writing, Rachel Lewis' "(Anti) Prison Literacy: Abolition and Queer Community Writing" (2019) discusses not just queer prison literacy, but also the inordinate incarceration rates of queer people of color, especially queer Black people. This, to us, indicates a knowledge that the prison and the queer communities are not cohesive—and that it is only through acknowledging intra-community difference that we keep from erasing it and from it going unexpressed in our scholarship. While Lewis does not mention intersectionality specifically, it underlies her understanding of the community she works with.

Another instance of intersectionality in *Reflections* is Lehua Ledbetter's "Understanding Intersectional Resistance Practices in Online Spaces: A Pedagogical Framework" (2017/2018). Ledbetter discusses the experiences of multiple marginalized people in both teaching pedagogy and the online beauty community. Her understanding, like Crenshaw's, "embraces and builds from difference and intersectionality" (39). Both of these pieces, Lewis' and Ledbetter's, seek to understand how difference plays a part in community writing, and intersectionality is a way of thinking that values understanding difference. In community literacy studies beyond the journal itself, Eric Pritchard's research in Black LGBTQ communities, for instance, draws upon Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality to fashion what he terms "restorative literacies," an important intervention in the field of literacy studies. Restorative literacies "codify the diversity of methods Black LGBTQ people use to create and sustain their identities and environments in ways that demonstrate and engender self- and communal love" (2017, 246). Together, we see in these studies promising first steps toward the generative use of intersectionality as a framing to better understand the creation of differences within communities and the agency of writers who write from within them.

THE ENTANGLEMENT OF PUBLIC/CIVIC/DEMOCRATIC

Current conceptions of community deeply intertwine with notions of the public as a civic and democratic concept. This intertwinement presents some opportunities for the field to gain more intersectional understandings of community writing. First, we ask, how do we define community writing? Second, we should consider where the idea of the community is centered—in membership, in relationship, and/or in a feeling of belonging to a group.

First we would like to address definitions of the term community. While, for instance, community literacy scholars often define “community literacy,” community itself gets very little attention as a term. This appears true across community engaged writing more broadly as a field. In some cases, like with Wayne C. Peck, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins (1995), community seems to be in contrast to a university, as they describe the community working alongside the university—implying a separation between the two. (200). Years later, Lorraine Higgins, Elenore Long, and Linda Flower (2006) would return to a discussion on what exactly community literacy meant to them. While they gave more nuance to the original definitions several of the authors had made in 1995 and spun out more of their own thoughts, they also wrote, referring to Flower’s 2002 and 2004 works, “thus, we were not describing an existing community but aspiring to construct community around this distinct rhetorical agenda, to call into being what Linda Flower described as ‘vernacular local publics’” (9). In this aspect, it appears to some scholars that community literacy is not about observing the literacy practices of a currently existing community at all, but instead about building communities in the public through rhetorical practices. But it is still unclear precisely what a community is to the field of community writing, and how it differs from the public. After all, as Higgins, Long, and Flower write, for them community literacy is “in one sense, an invitation for others in composition/rhetoric to locate the profession’s work more broadly in the public realm” (9).

So, for these scholars, what defines the community is some aspect of public service work where the scholars seek to use university resources to give access to institutional literacies by teaching in these communities. There are other explorations of the public in

community writing, as well. Long, in her 2008 monograph, puts it this way: “local publics are located in time and place. Their potential (as well as limitations) as hosts for ‘actually existing democracy’ makes them important sites for rhetorical inquiry (Fraser 109). More than any other entity, local publics constitute the community of community literacy” (5). Here we see the ways scholars tie their definition of community to the notion of the public, like local publics, counterpublics, and the plural “publics,” implying the possible existence of many smaller publics within the larger concept of “the public.” As we can see even from the name changes and focuses of *Reflections* over the years, community writing is almost intractable from some notion of public writing. The hermeneutic of the community is partially a hermeneutic of “the public.”

Social theorist Michael Warner’s 2005 book *Publics and Counterpublics* significantly shaped how literacy studies as a field discussed “publics” as a way of defining communities. He writes that there are seven principles of a public:

A public is self-organized, a public is a relation among strangers, the address of public speech is both personal and impersonal, a public is constituted through mere attention, a public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse, publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation, and a public is poetic world making. (67-114)

The word public was useful shorthand for identifying communities as a phenomenon in community writing. Some notable examples of scholars in composition and rhetoric who have picked up on the conversation on publics in communication studies include Paula Mathieu’s *Tactics of Hope* (2005), Christian Weisser’s “Public Writing and Rhetoric: A New Place for Composition” (2004), and Elenore Long’s *Community Literacy and the Rhetorics of Local Publics* (2008). Media scholar Sidney Dobrin, however, troubles the use of the word public to define the work of the discipline, writing that “simply put, what I want to do here is to take this binary, this potential for collision, to task and argue that the distinction between public and private discourses is both false and limiting in our understanding of communication” (2004, 216). One of the ways the public/

private binary may be limiting, as Dobrin notes it is, is that it keeps scholars from more deeply exploring the ways shared meaning and relationships are a part of how communities practice literacy.

Public as a term also ties deeply into certain ideals of the “citizen,” and with it, ideals of democracy. Part of the fascination with “public” as a term comes from community writing’s roots in the field of rhetoric and composition, where we deeply value service work such as service learning and community outreach projects. A public, as well as publics, are useful terms for discussing that very civically-minded, democratic work. For instance, one can see this utility when Eli Goldblatt utilizes Saul Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals* as the backbone of his article “Alinsky’s Reveille: A Community-Organizing Model for Neighborhood-Based Literacy Projects” (2005). Goldblatt is specifically interested in organizing for collective power in a neighborhood-based project. He uses the framework of democracy as part of the project of public education specifically for a community organizing project (284). This is how the public/democracy frame functions in service-based community literacy. In this situation, the community can leverage the frameworks of publicness and democracy in order to organize themselves in specific ways for specific goals.

When the field interrogates the terms “community” and “public” more deeply, they reveal that there are some areas where we might consider new hermeneutics for our work. For instance, the public/private binary leaves little room for the nuances of community writing that are closed to a more general public but open to their own members, or the ways information circulates among social media and internet spaces that may appear open but require substantial community knowledge to decode. The public/private binary narrows how the field acknowledges the ways that individuals in communities share meanings within texts, and the reciprocal relationship formed between a text and a community that a public notion of texts elides. It does not acknowledge the ways that communities decide what texts belong to the community — not just the author of the texts, but its audiences, decide what—and by extension, who—belongs to the community. These all represent the possibilities for the field to pursue. Intersectional thinking makes room for new conceptions of community beyond the public with a focus on power and creation

of difference within community groups, giving us new language to express the experiences of community writers and articulate how communities may use belonging as both a method of empowerment and disenfranchisement.

How, precisely, does community writing define a public, which is so much a part of how it defines “community?” Michael Warner notes that, at least for his definitions, a public “exists *by virtue of being addressed*” (2005, 50). This is a circular project of addressers cohering the group by addressing it. We believe this may be one of the factors that rhetorically makes “public” feel like it lacks something community writing seeks, especially when it comes to intersectional analyses. Communities exist regardless of being addressed and are cohered by factors other than being addressed.

A community can exist in many ways, some of which include address but do not need that address to exist and be valid. Instead, they need communication—but, that is different from address. “Public” does not imagine the reciprocal relationship between a community and a text, nor does it imagine intra-group difference and how that might shape the response to an address. A member of a public does not get a say in whether they are in the public. The addresser decides that by addressing them as such. This starts to show some of the cracks between a “public” for community writing purposes, and a “community.” Communities involve shared recognition—they require membership, a belonging that others within the group recognize. Publics do not require membership, just the act of address. “A public” or “publics” as descriptions of communities then seem to do a disservice to the nature of communities many studies describe, where those being addressed have significant stake in texts within their communities. They are involved in the community writing practices more broadly, and they may choose to recognize or not recognize texts as speaking to or for them. The idea of publics seems to give less agency to community members and their reception and interpretation of texts. It puts the primary focus on the act of addressing in a way that seems counter to how the field actually thinks about community literacy practices. It does not allow for scholars to differentiate easily among different kinds of members or for them to articulate the different experiences that end up comprising the community experience. It is about membership—but not about belonging. For the field to name

belonging as important, and difference as important in community writing work, would be to open up a new way of discussing intersectionality in the field.

Who determines this membership may be a complex question; much like the membership of a public, it is a question about power. Intersectionality as a way of thinking can help the field, with time, to better unpack how community membership functions. Catherine MacKinnon (2013) notes that intersectionality was a way for legal scholars to unpack the way multiple forms of oppression came together to legally separate people from their communities. In essence, Black women were having difficulty gaining traction in court cases because the law could only recognize Black women's experiences as the experience of either racism or sexism—there was not yet a way to understand it as both. Intersectionality could be applied similarly outside of legal contexts to community writing's understanding of the mechanisms of power around community belonging.

Some scholars have also painted a more complex vision of how notions of the public and democracy play out in communities. For instance, in Ellen Cushman's *The Struggle and the Tools* (1998), she notes that there seems to be a significant disconnect between the public and the idea of democratic access. Cushman writes that “while community members understood the democratic mission of these [public] institutions, they also fundamentally mistrusted the motivations behind many gatekeepers' actions and words” (227). Cushman is recognizing that, while democracy can seem a tantalizing and noble idea, its execution can often leave marginalized groups disillusioned. Cushman observes the ways democracy currently exists in a public and how to improve on the flaws within an existing democracy. This is likely one of the other attractions of “public” work in community writing: it invests in ideals of civic goodness.

This framework of publicness and democracy is less useful when community organization is not the goal, however. This democratic notion of the public, which underlies much of what scholars imply when they utilize the term, is not negative. It is limiting, however, in that many community writing projects may not be interested in civic or service-oriented work and may not be interested in organizing

or rehabilitating the democratic public. After all, the project of democracy is not the project of every community. Take, for instance, Native American communities. What are the implications of using a “public” to describe a given tribe? And how does using “public” as a descriptor erase difference, and especially elide the most marginalized experiences? This is not to say that the notion of a public is necessarily bad, but it has limited utility when engaging with intersectionality in community writing. This is due to its heavy connections to civic and democratic notions of public writing, which decolonial frameworks, among others, may find constraining to work within. Intersectionality, which focuses on analysis of power relations and constructions of difference, allows a different way of thinking which may be more useful when the concepts of public, civic, and democratic do not align with the community’s interests.

We believe a useful intervention in the field would include disentangling community from the public as a hermeneutic for understanding. The field can then work to build new ways of understanding that embrace belonging, difference, and empowerment through intersectional frameworks. In her analysis of memes in online communities, Abbie DeCamp is exploring how queer memes function as a form of community literacy. These memes both help cohere groups to find resilience and sometimes political power together, but they can also function as mechanisms of harm or ways of marginalizing group members. Through intersectional community thinking, she moves away from a public, constituted by strangers, and toward new ways of thinking about the relationships, power dynamics, and intra-group differences in the spaces of queer community writing.

Community writing scholars are deeply invested in activist work. However, doing the best possible activist work in community writing requires engaging with the way terms may be eliding the experiences of the most marginalized members of the communities we write about, with, and for. We must grapple with the ways current ideas of community tie into ideas of publics, and how scholarship has constructed publics as a hermeneutic. Taking up intersectionality when the field articulates what community means to us can help to better express the experiences of multiply marginalized people, and to work toward empowerment through difference and collective liberation.

NOTES

- 1 For an excellent explanation on misogynoir, see Moya Bailey and Trudy's recent work on misogynoir, "On misogynoir: citation, erasure, and plagiarism" (Bailey and Trudy 2018). This piece also explores citation and the erasure of Black women from terms they created to discuss their experiences, which is also an important consideration with intersectionality. They are among many who discuss the issues Black women face in academia around citation. The #citeablackwoman and #citeasista hashtags on Twitter also call for increased attention to how and when Black women are cited for their work, and Brittany M. Williams and Joan Collier (the founders of #citeasista) have made calls for bringing this attention to intersectionality, specifically.

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