

“At-Risk” of What?: Rewriting a Prescribed Relationship in a Community Literacy Nonprofit Organization: *A Dialogue*

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This paper draws on our time working together in a community literacy organization in New York, NY. In it, we describe the strengths of the program while also detailing our questions about how our “mentor/mentee” relationship was represented in the organization’s mission statement and fundraising rhetoric: specifically, the term “at-risk,” which was applied to the “mentees.” We describe the difficulties we faced when we proposed a writing workshop that challenged the organization’s mission statement and raise questions about the rhetorical tension inherent in education nonprofits’ reliance on funding. We ask community literacy nonprofits to consider whether their mission statement and fundraising language inadvertently individualize and/or racialize systemic inequities in public education and argue in favor of community-defined mission statements.

Between 2008 and 2011, the two of us were involved with a New York City-based nonprofit that aimed to “empower” 50–60 girls per school year by pairing them up with women mentors working in writing-related professions. At one of the first meetings of the year, in September 2008,

we met during a “speed-date” activity, discovered our common love of music, and requested that we be paired as mentor/mentee. At the time, Cherish was a 15-year-old high school student who had already co-written a young-adult novel with her twin sister. Vani was 25 and worked as an assistant editor at a book publisher.

Once a month, we attended creative writing workshops at the program office. Twice a year, we performed our work at public readings; typically, we played guitars and sang songs we had co-written. The rest of the time, we met weekly to work on our writing. We sat in coffee shops writing and talking on the weekends, visited each other’s homes, and started a creative writing blog together. As we got to know each other, we started talking openly about our “mentor/mentee” relationship. We felt that we learned from each other and were both uncomfortable with the prescribed power dynamic of a “guiding” mentor working with a mentee who was presumed to be in need of guidance. One day, while we were sitting in a coffee shop talking about this dynamic, we pulled up the organization’s website and read the mission statement together. Cherish was offended that the organization described her and the other girls using the word “at-risk.”

“I don’t hang out with anyone who’s a bad influence. I don’t drink or do drugs. I study.” She tried joke about it: “If I’m gonna be a teen mom, I’d better get going soon!” She zeroed in on a line about how mentors help mentees make “healthy” life choices: “Now I’m thinking would I have ended up a stripper or something had [the organization] not been there in my sophomore year . . . yeah I think not.” She acknowledged, “I do feel underserved by my high school—they don’t have a writing class I can take. But I’m not at-risk.” As we talked, it became clear that the words “at-risk” carried racial connotations; most of the “at-risk” high school girls who attended this nonprofit were Black or Latina, and the majority of the “guiding” mentors were white.

We decided to challenge the organization-defined terms of our relationship by proposing a writing workshop on language and identity for the new class of mentees. We hoped to facilitate an activity where mentees would collectively rewrite the language that was

being used to describe them in the mission statement. The nonprofit staff was really excited about the idea at first; however, when we submitted our initial lesson plan, we were met with an institutional wall. "We can't really let the girls rewrite the mission statement," said one of the staff members apologetically. "The language sucks, but it's what our funders understand."

In "An Invitation to a Too-Long Postponed Conversation: Race and Composition," Octavio Pimentel calls on writing instructors to "begin to identify the ways in which our own writing classroom produces racist ideologies," so that we can "begin to deconstruct and produce alternate practices" (101). We would like to extend this call to community literacy organizations, as well and ask community literacy administrators, workers, and volunteers to consider "alternate practices" not only with regard to the languages and literacies facilitated within the organization, but also the language used to describe workshop participants in mission statements and fundraising materials. In this article, we discuss our time in the program, along with the questions and tensions that arose as we began to question the program's mission statement and fundraising language. We hope this discussion will inform community literacy organizations' representations of their participants and infuse a discussion of racially coded language in community literacy studies. Because the critiques we arrived at were born out of conversation, we tell the story in turn, in our own words.

Cherish: The application to get into the organization was pretty high-pressure. My sister and I agonized over what part of our novel to include. When we made it to the group interview, the two of us were thrust into this group of ten or so girls and the director. She asked us questions, and I hardly got a word in edgewise. The girls there were smart, well spoken, smart, comfortable in front of crowds, and did I mention smart?

My saving grace at the end of the interview was taking out a copy of my school's anthology that featured a narrative I had written about a tubing adventure in Georgia. I showed it to the

director to prove that I could put together a sentence. In fact, it was during the process of making this anthology that I was told about the mentoring organization. One of my teachers recognized that I loved to write, and said to me, “Your narrative is coming along great. There’s an organization where a whole bunch of high school girls get together to write. I think you should apply.” She gave me the web address.

I didn’t realize that I cared so much about whether or not I made it into the organization, until I got a message on my home answering machine (yes, my mother still has a landline) telling us that we made it in. I was in this exclusive, dare I say elite club. I was a part of something not affiliated with school. I had something to do one Saturday a month. I could write in purple ink!

Vani: I was really happy when I was accepted, too. I wanted to transition from editing into teaching, and becoming a mentor felt like a great opportunity to get experience facilitating creative writing workshops. I also had loved my job at the writing center in college and enjoyed working one-on-one with writers as they revised their work in my editorial job. The idea of developing an ongoing relationship with a young writer was exciting to me. And the organization’s monthly workshops were wonderful—I had never been a part of an intergenerational group of women writers before. It was a safe space to develop my own creative writing practice in the company of other people I really respected.

Cherish: The monthly workshops and weekly private sessions were designed to help us learn about various genres of writing. Sounds good right? Well, I kind of freaked. Like I said, the girls were really intellectual and colorful and awesome and talented when it came to putting words on paper. The workshops felt like meeting someone you really admire. There’s a hesitance, but for the most part, you really want to let them know you’re a fan. There is also a moment when you choke up and you can’t say anything.

I also freaked out about the getting-a-mentor thing. See, I am a twin. My twin and I get each other. We laugh at our own humor.

If you ask our mother, she will swear sometimes we communicate without talking (yeah, sure mom), and I didn't really know how this woman, whoever she was, would interpret me. It's dramatic, but that's how I felt.

My first year at the organization was really just getting to know Vani. One of the requirements is that the pairs have to meet weekly to do — what else — but write. In the beginning the meetings were a little stiff. Eventually I loosened up. We started bending the rules a bit. We had jam sessions at Vani's place. She took me to a music store in Brooklyn, so I could play a twelve string purple guitar. We started writing songs.

Vani: And as we got to know each other, we also started talking openly about our "mentor/mentee" relationship. It began when we'd run into my friends or when I began meeting Cherish's teachers, classmates, and family. We never knew whether to introduce ourselves as "mentor/mentee" or as "friends." It was always a little awkward.

At the heart of the awkwardness was that we felt that we learned from each other. For example, we had different philosophies of writing—I tend to use creative writing to sort out things that have happened to me (usually via poetry or nonfiction), while Cherish used writing to sort out the world around her (typically via fiction). This was true of the other women in the program as well—mentors and mentees alike had their own strengths that they shared with the larger community of writers. In the space of the writing workshops, it didn't feel like we were divided along mentor/mentee lines—it was just a great group of women who got together once a month. Increasingly, Cherish and I became uncomfortable with the prescribed power dynamic of a "guiding" mentor and "guided" mentee. When the two of us read the mission statement language together, this discomfort really hit home, and we began to talk about the link we perceived between the term "at risk" and race.

Cherish: I neglected on purpose to mention the race of the girls that were part of the organization. They were a diverse lot. For instance, I'm Black. Off the top of my head there was a girl from Tibet, and a girl from the Dominican Republic. The girls truly came from all over, which is great; it reflects the diversity of the city that we all call home. So, labeling the mentees "at-risk" kind of put a wrinkle in my forehead.

I was raised in a single parent household. My mother is no dummy. She has a degree. I'd rather veg on the couch than hang out outside. I was asked once if I wanted to buy marijuana. I was so upset and appalled someone would even ask me that—even my own mother laughed at me.

See where I'm going with this? I will wear my shoes down until the soles quack, not because I can't buy new sneakers but because I'd rather run to the Broadway store and skip out of there with three soundtracks and two DVD's of shows filmed live. How many "at-risk" teens do you know who can sing *A Chorus Line* to *Young Frankenstein*?

Vani: That was my reaction, too. The "mentees" were so talented, so accomplished. Most were the shining stars of their English classes in high school—like you—and that's why they were referred to the organization in the first place. Their writing—including yours—blew me away. What were they "at-risk" of?

Cherish: When I hear "at-risk" I literally think of people who have hit rock bottom, who are in need of immediate assistance. This didn't ever cross my mind when I was around the girls at the writing workshops. I could see it in my peers in the halls at school but not at one of the organization's readings, or at the headquarters, or even after a workshop when we might walk to the subway station together.

Granted, I live in no apartment with a doorman and no doubt, there's been crime in my neighborhood, but this is NYC. There's crime—white collar and otherwise—all over the place. My

sister used to feel "at risk" walking to and from school in its gentrified neighborhood. If you let her tell you the story, she was in constant fear of being mowed down by a stroller that cost a thousand dollars. And for months, I felt "at-risk" of being called the N-word, after a kid screamed it at me when I was walking with a group of my classmates.

Vani: I remember your sister saying, "I dodge strollers, not bullets!" when people at college were all impressed that she grew up in New York City.

Cherish: Truth is, I seriously envied the other girls at the organization. The good kind of envy; the envy that made me say to myself, "I want to be like her when I grow up."

"AT RISK" OF WHAT?

"At-risk" can be understood as a metonymic reduction, where the term "at-risk youth" comes to stand in—insufficiently so—for a diverse and talented group of students, most of whom had been referred to the organization because of their promising writing abilities (indeed, some scholars advocate replacing "at-risk" with "at promise"¹). As Pica-Smith and Veloria argue, the phrase "at-risk youth" has been used in thousands of scholarly articles in education, but is rarely clearly defined and tends to reproduce a raced, classed deficit model (33–36). Ladson-Billings has also argued that this term unfairly shifts responsibility onto students (446); and Sapon-Shevin notes that "the category of 'at risk' is a broad, ill-defined label used to generate support and programming without careful examination of the accuracy of the label, the intention of the user, or effects of basing school programming on such a paradigm" (17).

As Pica-Smith and Veloria argue, "the construct of risk and 'at risk' must be deconstructed, interrogated, and problematized in order for students to develop a critical consciousness that extends beyond the individual level of analysis" (34). Their study, which deconstructed these discourses, was able to reframe them in term

of their institutional and systemic embeddedness. By deconstructing the mission statement together, the two of us were able to begin to change the story of our relationship. In “Youth ‘At Risk’: Further Marginalizing the Marginalized?,” te Riele asks education workers to move away from the term, noting that it has become a “shorthand, presumed to require no further explanation as to what it is that these young people may be at risk of” (130).² She argues in favor of the terms “marginalized” and “underserved” as alternatives to “at-risk,” explaining that these two terms, unlike “at-risk,” ask audiences to pose important questions: Who is doing the marginalizing? Who is underserving whom?

To consider these questions, we want to put the term—and by extension, the nonprofit itself—into the context of “a local political economy that shapes literacy and learning,” as Scott advocates in *Dangerous Writing* (142). Over the past few years, thousands of New York City public high school students, who were in elementary school when Michael Bloomberg took office as mayor in 2002, are graduating from high school unprepared for college-level work. In the last few years of his time as mayor, parents and students coined Bloomberg “Mayor 13%” for his administration’s failure to prepare eighty-seven percent of black and Latino students for college. Although the numbers are much higher for students of color, his administration has been accused of failing to provide for NYC public-school students across the board: “[J]ust one-in-four students overall are prepared for college under Bloomberg, and just 39 percent of public high school graduates last year reported they would be attending four-year colleges the following fall” (“Protestors to Gather”). When he was mayor, one of Bloomberg’s tactics was to close public schools and then reopen them with a brand-new staff; another tactic was to “co-locate” schools, which means that several different schools (some public, some charter) share the same physical space and compete for the same resources.

This was the case with Cherish’s high school and represents the context in which many of the participants in this nonprofit were referred to it by their high schools. The fundraising material of the nonprofit boasts that 100% of its high-school seniors go on to attend “prestigious” colleges—a claim that directly links creative writing and

literacy work with college preparation. Unfortunately, a statistic like this does not account for students who are not adequately prepared for college-level work as a result of underfunded and underserved high schools.

As former NYC high school student Jazmine Miller writes in the *Huffington Post*, if we really want to help students succeed, we need to make some significant, structural changes in public education. Miller graduated with a B average from a Bronx high school but ended up paying for remedial classes at SUNY Oswego, when she discovered she was not prepared for college level work. She situates her educational struggles in the context of city-wide education policy:

The City ended up cheating both me and the taxpayers. . . . You often hear the Department of Education brag about our improved graduation rates in NYC. But what good does it do to graduate more students if only a handful of them are prepared for the future and the rest will end up forced to pay out of pocket for remedial classes -- or just drop out? We needed smaller class sizes, better resources and more support for teachers and students alike. But instead of fighting for more funding and using existing resources to improve our schools, the mayor and Department of Education dismantled our neighborhood schools and wasted resources by starting new schools from scratch.

While the two of us do not undertake a larger political economic analysis of the privatization of education services, we are struck by the juxtaposition between public schools that cannot adequately prepare students, due to lack of funding and support and a privately-funded nonprofit that depicts students as “at-risk” and suggests a correlation between mentoring and creative writing/literacy programming and a 100% graduation rate. In our experience, the organization’s claim was not accurate and could not account for the larger structural inequities in public education.

Cherish: I have my own Jazmine Miller story.

My first experience with a school like Jazmine Miller's was in middle school—it was a chain preparatory school. People came to our elementary schools to talk about the prep school—they promised us small class sizes, instrument lessons and academics that would make us strong candidates for the city's specialized high schools.

My graduating class was about eighty students. I had weekly viola lessons in elementary school, but not anymore. When the guidance counselor asked me to take the entry exam for a chance at a popular specialized high school, I basically shook my head and laughed. My school focused more on how good we looked in our blazers.

When I applied to high schools, the one that I graduated from seemed like the obvious choice. It was small, new, and offered a music studio and art classes. Going there was a no-brainer.

When I say “new,” I mean that the school had only opened its doors a year before I started there. Sounds good, right? Well yes and no. Yes, because teachers actually knew you. All students, not just me, developed relationships with their teachers that don't really exist in most high schools. If you missed a day at school, you could bet they knew it. And if you were struggling with a subject, they knew that, too. But that's where the problem started.

Vani: That doesn't sound problematic—what was the problem with supportive teachers?

Cherish: Many of my classmates weren't motivated by education and often skipped school. This isn't to say that they didn't want to learn. Students and teachers developed bonds, and I believe the teachers didn't want to watch kids fail or drop out of school, so they watered down our academic work. Deadlines for papers that would decide grades were stretched and stretched so no

one would slip through the cracks. This approach worked fine until I was in college. Then, I realized that what our high school teachers said they were preparing us for—in other words, college or the job force—would never be as forgiving as they were.

With that said, I wasn’t the type of student mentioned above. In my head, I worked hard. But for lack of a better word, I was *comfortable*. And since I graduated in the top three in my high school class, I assumed I was ready for college. This wasn’t the case at all.

Vani: In what ways were you not prepared?

Cherish: My first try at higher education is something I really try not to think about too often. I went to a four-year institution where everything was the opposite of high school. Large classes, challenging classes, and professors who did not know my name. On top of all of that, I made the unfortunate decision to major in a science, because I did well in it during high school. Everything I knew was not good enough for college. I sought help, tutoring, transferring out of a class into one that was more of my speed, and I still could not catch up.

We didn’t get a real lab room until my senior year, so I only did two labs in my whole high school career. I passed every semester with an “A.” I earned those grades, but I wasn’t exactly up to speed for even basic sciences in college.

Shortly after returning home for winter break, I learned of my academic disqualification. It hurt so much, and it still hurts. I appealed to the college, explained how overwhelming everything was and how in hindsight, I probably shouldn’t have chosen the pre-optometry track as a Chemistry major. I explained my plan to literally start over and how I understood the college culture and was willing to take advantage of it in order for it to work for me. After all of that, I still was not accepted back. I felt like a failure and felt like I would not amount to much if I couldn’t go to school because that is all everyone talks about. They tell

you to go to school, but no one really explains that it's a huge adjustment and a major struggle just to do well enough to stay. I found out that even the valedictorian of my school had to leave college because she wasn't prepared. I ended up staying away from school for four semesters, working.

I'm thriving where I am now. I was able to find a community college to give me a second chance, and I amaze myself with how much I've grown since my first semester in college. My I.Q. hasn't risen, and I didn't take any classes to better my knowledge before making a return, but this school is smaller. I am older, and sometimes it takes literal blows to your self-esteem to push yourself in ways you assumed you couldn't go. Now, I'm hoping to join the Speech- Language Pathology field. When I transfer to another four year institution, I will hopefully be a Communication Disorders Major. You would think because of my "underserved" history, I would be scared away from the health profession.

Vani: If we consider these academic critiques of the term "at-risk," and the stories like yours and Jazmine Miller's, then it seems like we need words that more accurately describe the things students face within public education in NYC and the reasons why they might end up in a program like the one where we met. What do you think—are the words "marginalized" or "underserved" any better?

Cherish: Underserved is a tad bit better. It makes me wonder: underserved *how*? In education, extracurricular activities, personal life? And it's impossible to figure out really. What if I'm not underserved and others are just overindulged in those areas?

Vani: That idea makes me laugh. My instinct is to say that everyone deserves to be "indulged"—at the very least, "served"—by their high schools. What worries me is that terms like "at-risk" and "underserved" do harm when they're not connected to specific things. They have the racial connotations that you identified and also run the risk of making it seem like individual girls are responsible for huge problems in the public school system.

“REWRITING” A PRESCRIBED RELATIONSHIP

Out of this conversation and Cherish’s academic experience, the two of us began to understand that the label “at-risk” was particularly problematic because it removed the context of public education in NYC—something that every school-aged participant in the organization shared. We were troubled not only by the way this language framed the participants but also by how our relationship was mobilized to raise money for the organization.

As we progressed in the program as mentor/mentee, we began to show up on the organization’s fundraising material. One year, we appeared on the “holiday appeal” fundraising letter, side by side and laughing in a photograph, with a description of our relationship next to the photograph. Seeing our happy faces and description of our relationship—with Vani positioned as an editor and Cherish positioned as a NYC high-school-student—next to an appeal for money, though, made us uneasy. As Cherish put it, she felt like the organization was trying to pimp us out, because “we’re ethnic and we get along”—qualities that make us marketable to funders. What exactly made us marketable to the people who donate money—to that row of suits in the second row at the public readings? What is it about us that makes the *organization* seem worth investing in? We could take it in one direction and say, *it’s because we have a good relationship, and we were partners in the organization for three years; we are evidence that really strong relationships are forged through the organization.* Or we could take it in the other direction and say, *it’s because they want to “help” people of color and see people of color as inherently “at-risk.”*”

Either way, it was clear that the funders exerted influence over the way the organization framed its work. As communication theorist Stephen Reese writes, these frames then become “organizing principles,” structuring the social world within the organization (quoted in Adler-Kassner 12). In *The Activist WPA*, Adler-Kassner extends Reese’s discussion of frames to argue that they “extend from symbols—words, phrases—to signifiers” which may include “code words” that trigger “excess meanings” like the meanings that the two of us associated with the term “at-risk” (12). The mission statement

language—and the “mentor/mentee” divide perpetuated by the fundraising letter⁴—suddenly felt deeply connected to the political and economic framework of the literacy nonprofit.

Out of our discomfort, both with the mission statement language and how our “mentor/mentee” relationship had been transformed into fundraising material, we came up with a plan: we would publically challenge the organization-defined terms of our relationship within the organization. Neither of us wanted to bash the organization, but we also felt strongly that the organization shouldn’t think that Cherish “owed them everything” or was “saved somehow” via the program. This necessitated both that we critique the mission statement language and that we attempt to deconstruct the “mentor/mentee” divide. Although we had “graduated” from the program (as Cherish had graduated from high school), we decided that we would write to the organization, share our concerns, and propose that the new class of “mentees” would collectively rewrite the mission statement so they felt it accurately represented them. Unfortunately, as we mentioned at the beginning of this piece, revising the mission statement was not an option.

As we worked through our lesson plan with the nonprofit staff, it quickly shifted from a collective envisioning of identity to an individualized discussion of identity; in other words, a shift from a systemic reading of identity in the nonprofit context to an expressive exploration of the self. Below, we have reproduced our workshop lesson plan alongside the lesson plan that had been revised in collaboration with the program staff.

OUR WORKSHOP	REVISED WORKSHOP
1. Introduce ourselves & describe our conversation about the mission statement.	1. Introduce ourselves and the theme of our workshop: <i>language that gets used to represent us and how sometimes it's different from the language we use to represent ourselves.</i> Share our conversation about the mission statement. Introduce the idea that there are many ways that we can end up being identified in a way that we don't agree with. Transition by saying: <i>Now we want you to think about words used to describe you or people you know.</i>

OUR WORKSHOP	REVISED WORKSHOP
<p>2. Circulate printed copies of the mission statement. Ask girls to read the statement and write a brief reaction with the prompt “What do you think of when you read the terms ‘at risk’ or ‘underserved’? Do you identify with either one of them? Why or why not?” After five minutes of writing, ask the girls to share their thoughts, and then share ours.</p>	<p>2. Read the mission statement out loud but do not pass out paper copies. Pass out the following writing exercise:</p> <p>Cherish and Vani’s discomfort with words used in the mission statement is just one example of how we may disagree with the words others use to define us. Friends, teachers, institutions, and even family members are also capable of using language to describe us in ways that disturb or distress us or that we simply do not agree with.</p> <p>A) Take a look at the list of words below. Which ones have been used to label you in the past? Choose two or three. How do you think others define these terms?</p> <p>B) How would you define them?</p> <p>C) Now let’s think about these words in a different way. Are there any words on this list that you would use to describe yourself, if any? What are some alternatives to these terms that you would use to describe yourself? (feel free to add any words missing from the list)</p> <p>At risk / Underserved / Overachiever / Low Income / Teen girls / Black / White / Latina / Mixed or Multiracial / High Income / First generation/Immigrant / Undocumented / Woman of color / Privileged / Uppity / ESL / Troubled / Disadvantaged</p> <p>Share responses thoughts with the group.</p>

OUR WORKSHOP	REVISED WORKSHOP
3. Freewrite in response to the prompt “Who am I and why am I here?”	3. Freewrite in response to the prompt “Who am I and why am I here?”
4. Break into small groups to share/discuss. Ask each group to create a sentence or phrase that sums up “who we are and why we’re here.” Ask a delegate from each group to come up to the front and write their sentence on the whiteboard.	4. Break into small groups to share/discuss the way they identify themselves and their reasons for being at the organization. Ask for volunteers to share with the full group.
5. When everyone is finished, read the new collectively-created “mission statement” together.	5. This writing exercise provides preliminary information for a “personal mission statement” that can be incorporated into their biographical statements in the next workshop of the day.

The workshop, which occurred during a pre-planned long day of workshops for “mentees,” ran for around 45 minutes—a tight squeeze for the activity we had hoped to facilitate. In the end, we only got to step #2 of the revised workshop that appears in the left-hand column. In part, this was because the students were eager to talk about their individual identities. We do not disparage this at all—identity-related work is important, and there are few spaces to openly engage in dialogue about how we are externally defined and/or define ourselves. However, this activity sacrificed a collective re-envisioning how the *organization* was defining the students. So, even when one participant did explicitly identify as feeling “at-risk” (specifically, of being attacked when she walked home from the B train at night alone in the Bronx), we could not talk about this term specifically within the context of the nonprofit. In each of the workshop steps listed above, the identity-discussion was shifted outside the material context of the nonprofit into the girls’ individual experiences in daily life.

We understand that rewriting the mission statement language would have represented a resistance to the reliance on funders—a goal that was larger and more radical than anything the nonprofit was situated (or willing) to do and a goal that could potentially have jeopardized its “marketability” with funders. But the degree to which funders own the language of the organization—and by extension the frames and words that define and structure the relationships within and the writing pedagogy that is possible within the organization—still deeply surprised us. Then we considered the organization’s overhead, its need to rent space, pay staff, and provide workshop materials to its participants. We feel strongly that the organization is doing some really important things, creating “safe spaces” for women writers, fostering strong relationships like the one we had. At the end of the day, that’s what we want to hold on to.

And yet, when the two of us began speaking to each other about our discomfort with the organization’s language, it marked the first time we were able to contextualize our relationship—and the organization itself—in terms of the material reality we were inhabiting as mentor/mentee: the nonprofit’s need to raise money, the coded fundraising language, and by extension, larger trends in public education. With a critical understanding of this context, we were able to rewrite our

relationship and represent ourselves (to ourselves) as friends and collaborators, and the process of putting together the workshop—even though it exists on paper only—allowed us to “own” our relationship in opposition to the prescribed “mentor/at-risk mentee” relationship prescribed for us via fundraising rhetoric.

Cherish: A good compromise would have been to have the girls rewrite the mission statement anyway. I think it could have been like a secret document. Only those in the program would know the true details. Everyone else can accept the “official” statement. The girls would know better. I mean, who knows the girls better than the girls themselves?

Vani: How would you re-write the mission statement if it were up to you?

Cherish: Personally I think there will never be a perfect mission statement. One would have to be written and personalized for every mentee and mentor involved. What I got out of the program is not what my sister got out of her experience there. I wouldn’t trade my time there for hers, and I’m sure the feeling is mutual.

If I were to rewrite our mentor/mentee relationship, I would say, we were brought together by the obvious shared love for writing. We were paired together by agreeable ice breakers, and what keeps us together is our ability to learn from one another, the experiences, the advice, text, and email. It all goes back to writing.

My version of the mission statement would go something like this:

A community of female writers join together to nurture the creativity in high school students throughout the city. We help further the talents and shield ourselves from the sparks the girls generate.

Something like that.

Vani: I love that rewritten mission statement, because it really captures the joy that we all felt when we came together to write and share our work. But I wonder how we could get at the larger context of public education and the problem of the funders “owning” the organization’s mission statement and by extension shaping the relationships that form within the organization.

Part of me feels like it would be impossible for the two of us to do this individually without the voices of the other women in the program joining ours—we can’t really claim to represent a big diverse group of people like the organization. What if we added:

We are an intergenerational group of women who love to write. Many of the younger members of our writing collective attend public schools in NYC that are not well-supported enough by the city to offer creative writing instruction or college prep. We facilitate relationship-building, creative literacy, and the cultivation of a space for women to critically examine their lives in the company of others.

Mostly, I wish that the nonprofit was organized in a way so that the funders didn’t exert such influence over the organization—so they didn’t have to emphasize the mentor/mentee divide, define us in ways that made us uncomfortable, and make misleading claims about the students’ 100% rate of graduation from college. I wish it was organized in a looser, more grassroots way.

Cherish: In a perfect world I believe that non-profits would be more relaxed. They would do well to let things fall where they land. I feel like non-profits feel a pressure for certain things to happen at a certain time and often the spirit of the program gets lost in the mix. I can see the conflicts faced by those who run nonprofits and the impact that they are hoping to have (and they do make an impact!).

Thinking of other students who might be involved in similar organizations, I hope they’re doing it because it makes them happy, not just because they think it will grant them all their

wishes in post graduate life. Go, learn, enjoy yourself because there is a lot more to do when it’s all said and done.

A MODEST CALL TO ACTION

We understand that community literacy organizations are under pressure to justify their work to funders and that this sometimes means defining the people they serve with words that those people might not choose themselves. We ask those crafting this language to consider: would you feel comfortable sharing these words with the participants themselves? If not, what does that indicate? What uncomfortable power dynamics might be reproduced in your mission statement and fundraising rhetoric? The *space* of the nonprofit felt different for us, when we knew how we were being defined by it—might this be true for your participants as well?

These are hard questions, and we do not mean for this article to be an indictment, but rather, to start a conversation, both within the walls of community literacy organizations and within the field of rhetoric and composition at large. As Scott argues, “social dynamics are inextricably bound up with the processes of naming—processes that are enacted against the backdrop of, and perhaps in conscious opposition to, the cultural dominant . . . They therefore call upon teachers and students to create a new discursive space and subject position—to ‘come into being’ in politically creative and dynamic ways.” (143). How might community literacy organizations—perhaps those in the early stages of forming and less-beholden-to-funding than the one where the two of us met—facilitate this type of “politically creative and dynamic” space for discourse and subject-formation?

Given the necessity of funding, this might necessitate creative and grassroots approaches to fundraising.⁵ That being said, we recognize that many community literacy organizations are not in a position where they would consider jeopardizing their funding or significantly re-thinking their funding structures. We understand that these organizations do not always frame themselves as changing-the-

system or tackling the economic causes of structural inequality in access to literacy programming. So, our modest proposal is that—as Cherish suggested—community literacy organizations facilitate spaces where participants can collectively represent themselves and “read” the material context of the organization—and with it, the material conditions within which the organization is embedded. By doing so, organizations can push back against complicity in structural inequality and build critical literacy among participants, and organizational identity could begin to shift internally, even if the organization’s public face remains the same. From this place of critical questioning and re-envisioning, participants might move forward with a sense of how to imagine and enact grassroots literacy organizing that moves beyond traditional funding structures. After all, participants make the work possible in the first place.

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NOTES

- 1 Swadener (quoted in Sapon-Shevin 18) writes: “What if we changed the label ‘at risk’ to ‘gifted’ and provided similar enrichment programs, activities, opportunities and expectations?” Swadener further suggests reframing “at-risk” as “at promise,” to counter ideologies of deficiency.
- 2 Other scholars discuss student self-labeling; for example, Duncan (2011) discusses an after-school program that she leads/directs, where students choose to enroll if they understand themselves to be at risk of dropping out of school.
- 3 In *The Revolution will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Nonprofit Industrial Complex*, a book edited by the group INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, the authors argue that because nonprofits rely so heavily on fundraising to pay staff salaries, rent workspace, and provide material resources to students, they are vulnerable to the ideological interests of their funders. INCITE! experienced this firsthand in 2004 when they released a statement of support for the Palestinian Liberation struggle and subsequently lost a Ford Foundation grant on charges of anti-Semitism (ADL).
- 4 INCITE! argues that nonprofits can contribute to fostering a cultural divide between the “helpers” and the “helped,” and also contribute to a false sense of complacency about systemic inequality, like the problems that Cherish faced in public school system in New York City. INCITE! defines the circulation of capital between public and private contexts and the complicity of nonprofit organizations in neoliberal economic policy as the “Nonprofit Industrial Complex [NPIC].” INCITE! authors argue that the NPIC has cultural, as well as material and ideological, repercussions. As Christine E. Ahn explains in “Democratizing American Philanthropy,” the NPIC both fosters a cultural divide between the “helpers” and the “helped” (which we sensed in the writing nonprofit mission statement language of “empowerment”), and also contributes to a false sense of complacency about systemic inequalities under neoliberal

economic policy: “This worldview nurtures a culture of noblesse oblige, the belief that the wealthy and privileged are obliged to help those less fortunate, without examining how that wealth was created or the dangerous implications of conceding such power to the wealthy. . . . Many Americans are seduced by the idea that piecemeal voluntary efforts can somehow replace a systemic public approach to eliminating poverty” (Ahn 63-64). She further argues that nonprofits can actually exacerbate social inequality, as the charitable donations by funders “divert money away from the collective tax base” and play a role in “declining government responsibility and growing concentrations of power among the wealthiest corporations and individuals” (64).

- 5 After losing their Ford Foundation grant, INCITE! developed grassroots approaches to fundraising that enabled them to maintain both the organization and its strong political stances.

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