

# The Rhetorical Imagination of Writing Across Communities: *Nomos* and Community Writing as a Gift-Giving Economy<sup>1</sup>

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*This article examines the metaphorical confluence between notions of ecology and economy to argue that there is a deep connection between taking care of our spheres of belonging (ecology) and organizing our resources for our spheres of belonging (economy). Invoking the principles of gift-giving economy, this article offers this story of Writing Across Communities as a representative anecdote toward re-considering the cultural and economic arrangements by which we instantiate community writing programs.*

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As we constellate economies of writing, Rhetoric and Composition scholars and teachers take on the role of discursive shape shifters. Ostensibly, we seek to make issues surrounding the distribution of social goods visible and explicit. In reality, constructions of social power, currencies of writing, and language diversity shape discussions about literacy education, in general, and writing programs that move beyond the curriculum more specifically, whether we acknowledge these dimensions or not.<sup>2</sup> How we set the limits of our conceptual metaphors

for the work we do, how we call ourselves, how we constitute ourselves rhetorically, and how we sustain the economies of writing, represent the values and principles we seek to enact as scholars, teachers, and educational advocates.

In “Writing, Economies, Activism, and Community Work,” Keith Gilyard limns economies of writing to include the broad construct of economy as “the circulation of ideas relative to goods and services” and the more limited concept of the fiscal operations that structure and classify communities in and beyond the academy (461). In practice, can we ever separate out the fiduciary dimensions of writing from the intellectual? What remains unexplored in professional polemics like Gilyard’s is how the exercise of power and the circulation of authority through university-level writing programs involves the troubling rhetorical work of balancing the demands of acting as stewards of institutional instrumentalities, and at the same time, acting as agitators or change agents. Even more importantly, we engage in strategic evasion of the material conditions shaping our students’ writing lives when they represent the many vulnerable communities, “a threatened generation” (Owens).

The gaps separating academic, professional, and civic literacy education constitute a kind of intellectual solastalgia alienating historically-underserved groups. Environmental philosopher Glen Albrecht terms *solastalgia* as a condition of alienation and displacement within one’s own place (42). *Solastalgia* is the very antithesis of the Spanish notion of *querencia* (home—a derivation of the verb *querer*, to love). The embodied effects of isolation and the inability to exercise agency over place can be mapped to such endemic border conditions as drug abuse, violence, physical illness, mental illness, and suicide—conditions that increasingly plague Southwest regional institutions and border communities. Too few gaze into this liminal gap.

In “Disciplinary Purification: The Writing Program as Institutional Brand,” Jeanne Gunner maps this liminal condition, identifying the writing program as “a site of tension where the conservators of place and the co-opters of space intermix indeterminately” (616). The productive tension Gunner describes, juxtaposing Sid Dobrin’s concepts of “occupied place” of institutional programs and the “open

space” of creative production, resembles what we might consider an “ecotone” or a transition zone. Gunner argues:

As market forces demand and reward institutions of higher education for the commodification of learning the increased “portability” of administration and writing instruction, a de-disciplinizing effect ensues, resulting in an increasing enclosure of research and an accelerated weakening in the connection of programs and disciplinary work. (618)

It is this nexus between the instrumental role of writing program administration and the soulwork of cultivating open spaces within the academy productive to rhetorical imagination and intellectual democracy that frames my discussion on the economies of writing.

## **ECOTONES, WRITING ECOLOGIES AND THE GIFT-GIVING ECONOMY**

Since the publication, “Writing Across Communities: Deliberation and the Discursive Possibilities of WAC,” I have been arguing for cultivating cultural rhetorical ecologies within and beyond university-wide writing programs. Conceptualization of Writing Across Communities (WACommunities) began through the sustained dialogues with my colleague Juan Guerra, stirring provocative questions about how we might constitute university writing programs that foster Guerra’s notions of “transcultural repositioning” and “transcultural citizenship.” Theoretically, Sid Dobrin’s, *Postcomposition* and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* have enhanced these aims with supporting arguments that more thoroughly tease out the rhizomatic relationships of discourse practice to place (ecologically, spatially, socioeconomically, linguistically, and psychologically). Pragmatically, Florence Krall’s reflective narrative *Ecotone: Wayfaring on the Margins* has helped to enrich the conceptual frame of cultural rhetorical ecologies with the notion of the ecotone. For Krall, an ecotone is a site of generativity—the “edges where differences come together are the richest of habitats” (4). The metaphor of the ecotone as a space that connects ecologies and economies, structure and agency, lends a productive conceptual lens, pointing to the necessity of sustaining marginal spaces in order that energy circulates and difference thrives.

For the purposes of this article, the metaphorical confluence between notions of ecology and economy forms an especially useful alignment for considering gift-giving economies. The ancient Greek notion of *oikos* (house) is linked etymologically to our contemporary constructs of ecology and economy. There is a deep connection between taking care of our spheres of belonging (ecology) and organizing our resources for our spheres of belonging (economy). Whereas *logos* conditions how we reason with each other and *telos* informs how we make sense of our world and inscribe meaning and purpose to our lives, *nomos* reminds us that all communities intuitively and implicitly rely on provisional rules of engagement, codes of conduct, or a grammar of belonging. Ecology as structure (*logos*) reflects our relationship to the spaces and modes of habitation while economy as agency (*nomos*) represents the practice of sustaining communities of belonging (implicit and explicit terms of engagement).

Historically, *nomos* denotes cultural norms or the socially-constructed laws of economics, not natural law (Jarrett). Sophistic rhetoric attributes the habitual customs of everyday life, the discursive practices and cultural knowledge that helps us cohere and function together to *nomos*. I take this notion of *nomos* as the first principle framing this discussion about the cultivation of the University of New Mexico's WACommunities project. In this dynamic tension between structure and agency, *logos* and *nomos*, rests the rhetorical work of literacy education. As such, I argue for a more capacious construct of literacy education that reaches beyond the limits of the academic classroom and invigorates cross-cultural civic and professional discourses. The enduring thorny question with which both Gilyard and Gunner tangle is, how do we value this rhetorical work (within the field and within institutions)? What is our currency of exchange?

In the metaphorical universe of economics, fiduciary emblems like "hard money" and budget lines function as the symbolic coinage (a metonymy) for our constructions of place (social position) and actions (labor) within the communities to which we belong. Money is a metaphor, a meta-discourse, an *oikoumene*. Economy, then, is the constellation of rhetorical traces of living in relationship with others, a paradigm of our interactions of exchange. The marriage of market capitalism to writing program administration represents a troubling

union. Fostering ecotones of difference demands a mixed economy of heterogeneous relationships in open and dynamic circulation rather than monologic, centralized, and homogenous hierarchies in a closed system of currency (power) accumulation.

Invoking the principles of gift-giving economy not as a panacea or a totalizing narrative, I engage the principles of *nomos* and gift-giving economies, as a counter-discourse in offering this story of WACommunities as a kind of representative anecdote toward reconsidering the cultural and economic arrangements by which we instantiate community writing programs. Can writing programs (First Year Writing, WAC, Technical/Professional Writing, and even Civic Engagement/Service Learning programs) suffer from too much of a good thing? Is it possible for the work of writing specialists across the spectrum to wither under the weight of its own economic affluence? One of the causalities of market capitalism is the loss of “social faith.” Hyde contends, “A market exchange has an equilibrium or stasis: you pay to balance the scale. But when you give a gift there is momentum and the weight shifts from body to body” (9). When we commercialize a community’s gifts (art, language, texts, writing) “the social fabric of the group is invariably destroyed” (5). There is only one essential principle for invigorating and sustaining social faith, “*the gift must always move*” (4).

Reflecting further on the economy of the gift, Ricouer highlights the asymmetry of relationships within gift-giving economies and the enigma that rests between giving, receiving, and giving back (480). It is the paradox of the gift-giving cycle that opens up generative spaces for writing. If we construct writing as capital, we engage literacy as a property toward ownership and accumulation; if we construct writing as a gift, we engage literacy as community property that moves and remains in circulation.

While institutionalized writing programs like First Year Writing, Writing Across the Curriculum, Writing Program Administration, and other subfields of the discipline increasingly grapple with market economies, wrestle with an unspoken Faustian Pact with neo-liberal, centralized, hierarchical management systems, and adopt the discourse of entrepreneurial profit-driven economies, branding,

quantitative assessment, and the demands of academic capitalism, emerging counter-narratives like Gunner's, press the limits of our rhetorical imagination. The work of cultivating sustainable and responsive writing programs situates literacy educators and scholars on the proverbial horns of a dilemma. How do we legitimate the work of literacy education by accumulating institutional power and at the same time, sustain ecologies of difference in fragile economies of writing by circulating cultural rhetorical energy?

As one such study of writing program liminality, this article extends Gunner's counter-narrative by plumbing the rhetorical imagination of *nomos* and the circulation cycle of gift-giving ecologies to explore the possibilities of constellating generative heterogeneous economies of writing. How might our field respond to forecasts of the future of higher education and enhance the well-being of the communities we serve without totalizing academic capitulation to market demands? University of New Mexico offers one such vision of the landscape of U.S. higher education on the near horizon. Offering an examination of UNM's local response to the educational needs of our diverse student population further extends the discussion of the discipline's broadening agenda.

## QUESTIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY AND LIMINALITY

Writing Across Communities (WACommunities) responds to the shifting rhetorical situation of a translingual and transcultural educational setting. Foregrounding the vernacular lives of student writers, WACommunities functions both as a trope (a metaphor) and a *topoi* (set of arguments) privileging the communicative resources students bring to their educational experiences (Kells "Writing Across Communities" 87). As a rhetorical response to local as well as national and global conditions of ethnolinguistic heterogeneity, WACommunities at the University of New Mexico stretches the limits of the rhetorical imagination and disciplinary boundaries. Foregrounding advocacy arguments that reflect many of the claims Suresh Canagarajah advances in *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations*, WACommunities adopts the notion that communication (written and spoken) transcends linguistic codes (standard and non-standard) and "involves diverse semiotic resources and ecological affordances" (Canagarajah 6).

Issues of diversity and sustainability have been central to a WACommunities approach to a university-wide conversation on literacy education since 2005, cultivating discursive spaces (intellectual ecotones) within the public sphere around questions of social justice, public rhetoric, and ethnolinguistic diversity. This student-governed, community-centered approach maps its conceptual umbrella around three spheres of literacy education: academic (curricular), civic/cultural (social and environmental justice), and professional (institutional/administrative) literacy practices influencing the health and wellbeing of the communities within our region.

In reality, what sustained this project for more than a decade is rhetorical imagination grounded in *nomos* and gritty-pragmatic application (*phronesis*), connecting intellectual and economic resources to the needs of the students we serve. Fiduciary resources in the form of grant support and dedicated rhetorical energy, function as the currency we have been circulating to sustain this conversation about university-wide literacy education. The leaders involved in WACommunities contribute varying measures of time, creativity, energy, and authority without expectation of remuneration. Building a gift-giving economy within the mixed economy of the institution, our leaders and sponsors leverage privilege and access to university-resources to recirculate literacy as community property and enhance the agency of constituencies at the margins of the academy. We contend that the least privileged communities within our spheres of influence should be the ones to which we direct our greatest care.

In New Mexico where nearly half of graduating high school students require remedial education in college, many of UNM's students live in some of the poorest communities in the nation. The international notoriety of the television series, *Breaking Bad*, filmed and situated in the heart of Albuquerque, offers a troubling portrait of the economics of desperation reflective of poor communities locally and nationally. As a response, sustaining attention on issues of scarcity and social justice remains central to WACommunities curricular and community efforts. Attending to the disparities and opportunities facing New Mexico's student populations, WACommunities leaders continue to generate conversations and approaches to literacy education that invite students to critically examine language, writing, and education

in light of issues of social justice. In these ways, WACommunities is first and foremost an advocacy initiative, cultivating an open and sanctioned space for vulnerable populations to develop and strengthen agency.

Central to this effort is the invitation to students and faculty to contribute to the conversations on writing in at least three spheres. In a social justice sphere, conversations take the form of dialogues around current issues such as environmental justice, language diversity, mental illness, public health, democratic practice, and civil rights (Kells "What's Writing Got to Do With It?" 89). Students are encouraged to explore how writing matters most to them in their diverse communities of belonging. In an institutionalized administrative sphere, WACommunities functioned as an agitating discourse calling attention to issues of access and student success. WACommunities leaders have facilitated the UNM core curriculum task forces, served on the provost's diversity committees and sponsored assessment workshops and faculty symposia. In a curricular context, WACommunities has promoted pedagogical models that move toward advocacy and the promotion of student agency.

WACommunities is concerned not only with what students know but also how they experience that knowledge and what they do with that knowledge to improve their communities. Writing matters because it authorizes writers and readers to take action. As a student-governed organization, WACommunities remains largely dependent upon its graduate student leaders to oversee, develop, and implement all these WAC sponsored activities. While the organizational structure of WACommunities is congruent with its mission, we readily acknowledge its limitations, particularly those related to institutional autonomy.

The challenges of building a WAC initiative solely on a gift-economy include: 1) a lack of consistent and reliable institutionalized resources; 2) informal protocols for transferring power and leadership and a reduced ability to sustain successful strategies when leaders leave, and 3) limited ability to scale up successful strategies without the painstaking process of brokering institutional partnerships or

resources. The success of WACommunities rests completely on the strength of its partnerships horizontally (across the institution) and vertically (up and down the administrative hierarchy). In other words, we have no “hard money.” Consequently, as long as WACommunities exists in its current form, there is minimal pressure on administrators to develop large-scale programs or invest in WAC as a formalized institutional structure or allocate new resources for these purposes.

Despite these limitations, successful initiatives are sustained by new graduate students replacing those who are leaving or graduating. In many cases, veteran graduate students take on mentor roles to train and appoint their own replacements. In other instances, new graduate students step up and seek out opportunities within existing strategies that resonate best for them. Indeed, a growing number of our graduate students attend UNM specifically to be involved in this initiative. Succeeding within this context of scarce institutional resources, WACommunities nevertheless thrives within and beyond UNM. Implications for mapping indexes of success for future writing program assessment, suggest constituting measures that represent the complexities of social networks of university writing programs, as well as the diversity, density, generativity, and sustainability of their economies of circulation.

## **THE ECONOMIES OF LITERACY EDUCATION: MAPPING AND MEASURING WRITING ACROSS COMMUNITIES**

Cultivating social faith is the primary outcome of a gift-giving economy. As Lewis Hyde maintains: “When the gift moves in a circle its motion is beyond the control of the personal ego, and so each bearer must be a part of the group and each donation is an act of social faith” (16). Assessing the value and effectiveness while keeping the principles of ecology and gift-giving economy in mind, challenges current measures of writing program assessment. From the onset, WACommunities has been guided by a commitment to transparency, openness, and inclusion. Through the use of annual planning and reporting memos, WACommunities leaders operate through the role of the chartered student organization called the WAC Alliance to articulate annual goals and measures progress. Success for WACommunities has been largely assessed through the

sustained sponsorships of workshops, forums, symposia; number of participants and community members reached through various activities; grant funding and co-sponsorships to implement activities; connections established to organizations within and outside of UNM; leadership in the national WAC movement; creation or participation in newsletters, publications and websites; community literacy involvement (Albuquerque Community Writing Center); and participation in curricular impact initiatives (UNM Core Curriculum Task Force).

While at first these outcomes may not appear to be readily quantified or measured, it is important to consider that WACommunities is first and foremost a student-centered organization designed to foster conversations and encourage students to take action. The WAC Alliance is strategically structured to evolve rapidly, and to change directions in response to rhetorical conditions. Traditional assessment models and standardized measurable outcomes that hold the organization accountable to one specific direction would ultimately hinder the ability of WACommunities to enact its purpose. The *telos* is not whether the organization has reached a set goal or milestone in the journey but whether it continues to move toward a destination it may never actually reach (Schroeder). Indeed, the journey is the destination. Sustaining the narrative of this journey, in spite of opposition, setbacks, and a lack of resources, is the index of success.

Herein rests the dilemma: How do we value and advocate for culturally-appropriate approaches to literacy education for linguistically-diverse and economically-vulnerable student populations within institutional spaces of the academy without the administrative imperative, infrastructure support, or economic instrumentalities necessary to do the work? Moreover, should we do the work of cultivating student-centered cultures of writing anyway? The WACommunities *ethos* of self-authorization and ethic of sufficiency would argue that there is an ecological imperative to advocate for our most vulnerable communities and, at the same time, contend that economic instrumentalities evolve out of the cultivation of rhetorical imagination and a pragmatic attitude of doing it, enacting it, and living it. More simply put, we constitute cultures of writing by figuring it out as we go.

While traditional WAC tends to privilege curricular discourse and faculty writing practices, WACommunities inverts this point of view and privileges the diversity not only of the curricular cultures of the academy but the students as novice writers learning to navigate and migrate across disciplinary, civic, and professional cultural spheres. Rather than invoking narratives of deficiency (the commonplace that “our students can’t write” frequently circulated on college campuses), our student-centered leadership casts the intellectual and linguistic resources that our students bring to the classroom from a sufficiency perspective (Gallegos). Rich in the currency of imagination and the sweat equity of self-authorization, the instrumentalities of institutional enactment are secondary. It is the soul of the enterprise that is the primary value.

The circulation of language and text through the educational relationship constitutes a generative gift exchange and an erotic commerce most productively constructed around the principles of presence and an open gift-circulation system rather than a market-driven economy of knowledge-making. A gift-giving economy relies on circulation not accumulation, rich in the transformative potential and cultural wealth of *nomos*. In these respects, we might call *nomos* both a grammar of belonging, as well as an economy of sufficiency. Additionally, a gift-giving economy implies a circular relationship or as Ricoeur describes, “The enigma lies in the connection between three obligations: giving, receiving, giving back” (480). *Nomos* organizes the enigmatic relationships of a gift-giving economy, maintaining balance, shifting power, invigorating relationships, and circulating energy toward enhancing sufficiency.

In *Rereading the Sophists*, Susan Jarrett etymologically limns the concept of *nomos* back to its Greek roots in the Homeric period as a pastoral term representing a “field or pasture” or a range of words, later extended to refer to a site or common meeting place for those who contend with words (41). *Nomos*, in this sense, is a foundational principle of democratic practice and self-governance. Jarrett concludes that in Greco-classical lexicon, *nomos* can be understood “as the expression of what the people as a whole regard as a valid and binding norm,” reaffirming the rhetorical “possibility

for reformulating human truths in historically and geographically specific contexts” (41-42).

As an economy of sufficiency, *nomos* resists deficiency or scarcity models of arrangement and moves toward a sufficiency model of social organization. An economy of sufficiency that invigorates the *nomos* of cultural figurations and discursive circulations is never about quantity. *Nomos* cultivates the generative context of cultural and linguistic exchange, and in this regard, invigorates rhetorical resources of the community. Constituting writing programs around an economy of sufficiency and a reverence for the soul or *nomos* of the communities, we seek to resist the deep capitalist imperatives that privilege market driven interests of corporate model academic institutions. Even more importantly, an economy of writing that responds to the deep human value of making culture, gets at literacy as something more than property or commodity.

Who are our sponsors, the intellectual, social, and collegial sources of support? From grassroots stakeholders to administrative leaders at the highest levels of the institution (including the offices of the president, provost, and numerous college deans), WACommunities brings stories about writing to the public table. It is this intrinsic notion of community, writing as literacy sponsorship, and a gift-giving economy that has informed the values and practices of WACommunities since the beginning. It is also one of the primary reasons that we cannot comfortably assign WACommunities to any single category within the field.

What's at stake here? UNM's WACommunities has no dedicated financial resources. No sanctioned institutional space. I never received (nor asked for) an administrative stipend or course release for this work. I never held an administrative position in my capacity as a WACommunities activist and community writing advocate. WACommunities has been sustained entirely through a volunteer administrative labor force (myself included) and a continuous loop of grant writing support over the past ten years. There is no office or formal reporting line. The emergence of this initiative has revealed over time the organic and durable nature of *nomos* expressed through the weaving of thick discursive strands with open-ended inductive

moments. What we have is an imaginative rhetorical presence and a vibrant and generative narrative of advocacy rhetoric.

A gift-giving economy generates shape shifting discourses that can disrupt if not transform logo-centric market driven institutional structures through a flexible narrative logic. Again harkening back to Jarrett's reading of *nomos*, Jarrett contends, "With the Sophists, *nomos*, a self-conscious arrangement of discourse to create politically and socially significant knowledge, enters as a middle term between *mythos* and *logos*" (60). This is not a metaphorical construct of Platonic form or structure, but a heuristic of human invention. The significance of this Sophistic theory rests in the possibilities of human agency for change.

Extending back to the etymological roots of *nomos* as a term for pasture, a range of discourses, as an in-between place, as a people who contend with words, I argue that keeping *nomos* in circulation calls for re-arrangements within our fields of practice (locally and nationally) toward configurations more conducive to student agency and wellbeing. Among the five canons of rhetoric, *nomos* belongs to the canon of arrangement and, at the same time, resists hardening of categories (placement/arrangements). *Nomos* is the engine or the energy system catalyzing hermeneutic projects like WACommunities, capable of both defining and transgressing institutional boundaries and categories. In brief, because of the principle of *nomos*, WACommunities as a hermeneutic project thrives in an economy of generosity and open circulation.

In contrast to a market economy that relies on the accumulation (capitalization) of power and energy in a closed cycle of transfer, returning power back to its source as profit, a gift-giving economy relies on the circulation of power and energy in an open continuous cycle of transfer away from its source. A gift giving economy engages the abundance of language, and at the same time, flouts economies of scarcity.<sup>9</sup> The inevitability of entropy, the vicissitudes of market economies, and the lure of academic capitalism have and will continue to condition the available means of persuasion for Composition scholars and practitioners. As a counter-discourse, however, vibrant gift-giving cultures operating in a system of sufficiency can help

to keep power circulating, promote community-driven governance, and stir the cultivation of an intellectual commonwealth within our institutions. As such, we need to cultivate systems of power transfer capacious enough to encourage both the coexistence of orderly and sustainable writing program administration alongside the unruly outliers, the “imaginal cells” that keep the soul of the community growing.

Finally, we need to be troubled by what might be lost as we wed market capitalism to community writing program development. We need to be cautious of the union of academic capitalism and literacy education (as well as community literacy), as well as resist constructing writing program administration into a totalizing system within our institutions. Moreover, we must consider how the economies of writing we seek to institutionalize, disrupt or cultivate ecotones of difference. We are all born with the capacity for language and the *need* for culture. Culture is our most basic human right. And, in turn, the commodification of culture and community is our greatest threat.

As we struggle to legitimate the intellectual and political work of Composition and Community Writing within the field and within our own institutions, we must be mindful of how we construct ourselves rhetorically as a profession, how we name the work we do, and how we constitute the economies of writing as reflections of the values and principles we seek to enact as scholars, teachers, and educational advocates. We keep an open space for *nomos* and a gift-giving economy when we keep an open space for democracy. The intellectual, rhetorical, political, and educational labor of writing is both an act of creativity and service, constantly refigured in the “fecundity of living.”<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 I wish to thank my colleague Steven Lamos (University of Colorado, Boulder) for his generous and thoughtful comments on the earliest versions of this article. I need to extend appreciation to Tim Schroeder (University of New Mexico, Office of the Provost) for his thoughtful study of the institutional space and structure of Writing Across Communities see Schroeder “Writing Across Communities: A Brief Organizational Analysis.”
- 2 Excerpts of this article were presented at the Community Writing Conference workshop, “Citizen Scholars and the Cultural Rhetorical Ecologies of Writing Across Communities” on October 15, 2015 in Boulder, Colorado. Workshop agenda and support materials are available at: Writing Across Communities Resources <<https://sites.google.com/site/resourcewac/>>
- 3 A heartfelt thanks to Donna LeCourt and her recommendation that the notion of a heterogeneous (or mixed) economy might be a reflective construct for the kinds of economies within which educational movements like Writing Across Communities function.
- 4 The term “fecundity of living” comes from Thomas Merton’s *Love and Living*, eds. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart. New York: Harvest/HBJ Books, 1979, 34. Print.

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