

“They Want to Tell Their Story”:

What Folklorists and Sociologists Can Teach Compositionists about Linking Scholarly Research to Nonacademic Communities

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This paper uses interviews with five publicly engaged, university-employed sociologists or folklorists in Houston to illuminate ways that rhetoric and composition scholars studying composition history can connect our research projects to nonacademic communities near our campuses. Drawing from covenantal ethics, it argues that we stand to re-see our work’s significance if, starting with general education classes like first-year composition, we share our research with members of nearby nonacademic communities and allow members of those communities to give our research new interpretations and uses.

Off and on since the 1980s, scholars and teachers in rhetoric and composition have explored the researcher’s role in relation to people whom he or she studies, whether college student writers, employees at specific businesses, or non-academic members of a community. Much of this exploration has centered on what compositionists have gleaned from an ethnographic research tradition acquired from anthropology, a tradition many compositionists know through

Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (1983), a study of children's literacy practices in two rural Southern towns. And since the publication of Heath's book, research methods associated with ethnography—thick description, triangulated data collection, extended on-site stays (Sheridan 76)—came under scrutiny by critically inclined scholars in anthropology and in rhetoric and composition for encouraging the researcher to create his or her own narrative of the researched, thereby disempowering and even objectifying the very people whose literacy practices the researcher set out to study (Brown and Dobrin; Applegarth 8-9). Questions of who speaks for whom, common in feminist theory and cultural studies scholarship, became a central consideration for some ethnographically inclined compositionists. Mary P. Sheridan summarizes the 1990's ethnography scene as one plagued, though not by any means ruined, by representational crises (79). By the early 2000s, Stuart Brown called researchers' practice of studying other populations for career advancement "a discursive relic of a colonial era" ("Beyond Theory" 300), while Bruce Horner described ethnography's long history with Renato Rosaldo's figure of the Lone Ethnographer who "rode off into the sunset in search of 'his native'" and later "returned home and wrote a 'true' account of the 'the culture'" (qtd. in Horner 15). Along with this criticism, discussions began about the ethical stances possible for the researcher attempting to work with and on behalf of nonacademic populations (e.g., Williams and Brydon-Miller 246).

The latter discussion arose with unusual care in English professor John Lofty and cultural anthropologist Richard Blot's 1997 conversation "Covering One's Tracks: Respecting and Preserving Informant Anonymity," which focused on the researcher's need to balance research accuracy and informant anonymity—or the acts of revealing and disguising—when gathering information about a community or culture. Building on Donna Deyhle et al.'s work, Lofty and Blot discuss several theories of moral behavior, including "critical theory and advocacy," which see ethical research as "necessarily promoting the needs and interests of those being researched." Another is the theory of "covenantal ethics," which "acknowledg[es] the specific obligations anthropologists incur" with the researched and clarifies "that the researcher's primary responsibility is to those he [sic] studies" (qtd. in Lofty and Blot 46-47). Following these guideposts,

Blot indicates that, consonant with the American Anthropological Association’s Code of Ethics, the researcher should work with the people whom he or she studies to decide how much information to reveal in published research (Lofty and Blot 49). Lofty and Blot end their conversation with questions about the ethnographer’s responsibility to those whom he or she studies if the ethnographer follows covenantal ethics. In Lofty’s words, “Is the ethnographer under any kind of reciprocal obligation to support publicly the professional lives of those who have made the study possible? Letters of support or recommendation—which on occasion I write—could link researcher, subject, and site” (Lofty and Blot 56). In other words, Lofty and Blot ask ethnographers to take seriously the social webs that they enter if they approach their research from the angle of covenantal ethics. Nowadays, we might interpret this complex dynamic as a literacy ecology, which Anne-Marie Hall describes as the way literacy “manifests itself in the *relationships between* groups of human beings living their lives in specific contexts or environments” (82, emphasis added).

For me, the mutually created ecology that Lofty and Blot elevate for attention is the one between the researcher and the researched, and the issue that I want to take up here is what the ethnographer’s or, more broadly, the qualitative researcher’s responsibility can be to those whom he or she studies. Entering this discussion as a rhetoric and composition scholar specializing in local histories of composition, and as someone sympathetic to Mary P. Sheridan’s call for compositionists to adapt ethnographic practices “for our own purposes” (80), I wondered what kind of “reciprocal obligation” (Lofty and Blot 56) I have to the people whose lives I pore over, to some degree, when I sift through archived collections at the public university where I work and in the surrounding city where I live. Although textual historical research differs from ethnographic research, both necessitate that the researcher strive to fairly interpret information from or about other people; and, if we accept the critical and covenantal ethical stances above, both push the researcher to use that information to benefit the population studied. Recently, in edited collections like *Working in the Archives* (Ramsey et al.) and *Beyond the Archives* (Kirsch and Rohan), composition historians entertained questions along these lines, Neal Lerner asking, “Do the persons being studied, those who contribute to the archive, or those in the present have some stake in the stories

being told?" (204). And the contributors to *Beyond the Archives* model compassionate consideration for many possible stakeholders of historical research.

To give me perspective on what a reciprocal researcher-researched ecology can mean, the degrees of involvement in each other's lives and interests that may result from qualitative studies consistent with critical and covenantal ethics, I interviewed five scholars working in my city who had made a name for themselves publicly and professionally by studying local nonacademic communities and cultures. None of the five scholars held graduate degrees in rhetoric and composition, a fact that I find important to enrich my awareness of researcher-researched possibilities. Rather, they identified primarily as sociologists or folklorists (though a couple of them had backgrounds in English studies); they had published books and numerous peer-reviewed articles on the communities that they had entered; and some of them were still, many years later, engaged with the local people whom they had studied, still contributing to the ecology that they had connected to a scholarly sensibility. Overall, what I take away from this interview data is that even when qualitative researchers study archived texts, we can use critical, covenantal steps to position our work as also the work of the community that we study; and if we reach out to living members from that community, we can re-see this research's significance. The cases that I discuss below unveil relational factors worthy of consideration, each case adding a new dimension (e.g., gender, trauma) to the responsibility we may bear to our research participants.

RESEARCH AS RELATIONAL MOVES

More than four decades after Brazilian educator Paulo Freire advocated for literacy work "forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed" (48, emphasis in original), Sarah Hart Micke et al. conjoined Freire's critical literacy and French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas's ethical framework for scholars working with lay populations. Observing that when Levinas taught in Paris, he "valued students' engagement with Parisian culture as part of their educational experience," Micke et al. explain:

[f]or Levinas, students' engagement with local places helped cultivate their responsibility for others. His students would emerge with traces of others' singularity—the artists, actors, performers, musicians, directors, etc.—by attending these cultural events and exhibits and also engage with other audience members and visitors directly. These places bear traces of others' singularity and also serve as sites of encounters and dialogue with others (127)

Micke et al. use Levinas's educational approach to describe their own Colorado-based history writing assignments, exemplifying "a pedagogy of responsibility" by "invit[ing] all participants—students, teachers, community members—to accept responsibility for sustaining places that provide resources and cultivate the self's attunement to responsibility" (134). Once given access to a report that complicated standard histories of the Denver, Colorado, area, their students wrote revisionary histories and planned events for public receptions and discussion of their work. That is, the students set the stage for relationship building surrounding their historical projects.

On a smaller scale, a similar impulse guided my steps to conceptualize mutually created and beneficial scholarly-lay relationships about local composition history. I reached out to individual scholars in my city who had worked regularly with nonacademic populations near my institution and whose research had left a clear local imprint. Thus began my work to see what it could mean for me to "cultivate [my] responsibility for others" (Micke et al.127). Or, to use Steve Parks' description of community-engaged scholarship, thus began my "desire to place [myself] in the struggle to build a common framework for collaboration" (1). Having collected numerous stories from local community members, the scholars I studied had their own stories of academic-public engagement that I wanted to heed. While documenting the practices (literacy or otherwise) of nearby communities, they had built rich and often enduring relationships with the people who had made their work possible. I gathered takeaways from the scholars' relationship building by meeting with them individually at a location of their choice and asking open-ended questions, embracing chances for my interviews to become

conversations. Our talks retained aspects of formal academic research, apparent in my IRB-approved consent letters and audio recordings. But generally, I let the scholars tell stories of their past and present engagements with nearby community members, and I endeavored to pinpoint what could transfer from their research milieu to mine. My underlying research question was, “what can compositionists learn from *non*-compositionists about linking scholarly research and local communities?”

Before I present my findings, however, I should clarify that I learned about the researchers whom I interviewed after having attended several well-attended programs that some of them had held around the city bringing together speakers and audience members from academic as well as nonacademic circles. One such event brought an internationally renowned folklorist and two anthropologists to the city to talk about their research at specific geographic and cultural sites and to encourage local mindfulness. Another event brought a series of writers, one of them a “found” author, to read from recent, locally published accounts of their interactions with our city—interactions with obscure city features, like an alley or a drainage ditch, that gained significance through the writers’ experiences. Yet another event brought together a sociologist who was studying Houston’s demographic trends and a journalist who had just published a book on the city’s thriving immigrant communities. Afterward, an audience member asked how we could learn from the new immigrant populations if we aren’t sociologists, folklorists, or journalists. The journalist commented that we all find ways, by blogging, writing, and so on, of “reaching out to hear other people’s stories” (Kolker and Klineberg), a point that resonated for me due to compositionists’ esteem of narrative knowledge to describe our field (Rosner, Boehm, and Journet) and to circulate concerns from community groups and marginalized individuals (Mathieu, Parks, and Rousculp; see also *Reflections*’ special issue on military veterans, edited by Eileen E. Schell and Ivy Kleinbart).

Having attended event after event focused on topics of both local public and broader scholarly interest, I approached a folklorist who had co-planned much of what I had seen. With his permission, I used him to find other ethnographically inclined scholars in the vicinity—in

effect, doing what social scientists call snowball sampling. My initial contact and first interviewee, Carl, showed how the identity category *researcher*, rather than separating people, can support personally, professionally, and communally enriching relationship building.¹ His investment in a project to document stories of displaced Hurricane Katrina survivors suggests that the researcher’s relationship to the researched may extend beyond a single project’s conclusion, may reframe who can act as a researcher, and may involve unanticipated partners and communication channels. Like Daphne S. Cain who discovered, while living and working in the same hurricane-ravaged region, that she changed as a scholar and social worker when she listened to Katrina evacuees (29), and who found that her research could have unanticipated effects on herself and others (32), Carl complicated what it means to be a *researcher* by suggesting that locally invested research can transform everyone involved. And similar to Cain, Carl’s research story gives further shape to outcomes of post-Katrina renewal efforts of the kind documented in the 2008 Hurricane Katrina issue of *Reflections* (e.g., McDonald 14).

Carl had spent much of his early scholarly career publishing on folklore in medieval literature, though his fieldwork and publications also explored a range of North American cultural groups. His first experience linking his research to a specific nonacademic culture in Houston occurred in 1980 when he picked up a hitchhiker who taught him about zydeco music and informed him of a zydeco club in the city. Carl then went to the club, met the people, and grew more interested. Around the same time, he began to realize how vast and meaningful his university students’ familial and communal ties in Houston were. Some students came from nearby Francophone cultures; others came from distant Nigerian cultures. As he put it, the students “br[ought] the community in” and taught him: “I was noting these pockets of extreme cultural richness and that seemed hidden from the rest of the city. And they were—and they still are to a large extent.” He added, “It was the students who were teaching me all this stuff, and eventually I was incorporating more [fieldwork on community cultures] into my classroom.” Soon he had his students study underserved neighborhoods, local musicians, and Jewish harvest traditions, among other topics.

One factor that drew national attention to Carl's teaching and research on local cultures in Houston was his responsiveness to Hurricane Katrina, which brought thousands of emigrants from Louisiana into southeast Texas, where they formed new communities. After an administrator at his university asked faculty for ideas about how to contribute to disaster relief efforts, Carl contacted two folklorists he knew in the region about a proposal to train and pay displaced laypeople to interview and otherwise document the experiences of people like themselves. The proposal stemmed partly from Carl's observation that displaced Vietnamese groups in Houston were forming their own communication networks to guide incoming Vietnamese from the disaster area to a local Southeast Asia-oriented shopping mall instead of to official disaster relief centers. This development had historical dimensions, and it offered rich opportunities for scholarly assistance and guidance:

At [the] mall was the headquarters of an organization . . . that was founded for the people who were coming in as refugees from the fall of Saigon in '75 and had been a service organization. So those people [fleeing Hurricane Katrina] went straight to their own, to people who spoke their language and knew who they were. And there were 13,000 people in the parking lot of [the mall]. So all these people are telling stories. They're telling stores that are intensely evocative of all kinds of important things about life and Louisiana and so forth. But there were also lessons in these kinds of underground networks that existed in my own city.

After collaborating with fellow folklorists and receiving institutional support and national grants, Carl gathered "kitchen table stories" from the displaced people, many of whom he taught methods for documenting their experiences. The people in turn trained more newcomers to the city and worked with him to collect their stories in a vast recording project called *Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston*, or SKRH ("Voices"). Their stories, collected largely by nonspecialists in the region, reached an international audience of both scholars and laypeople. (For more information, see the Houston Institute for Culture's website, <http://www.houstonculture.org/houston/SKRHphotos.html>.)

Before elaborating on the kitchen-stories model favored by Carl, I must note a contrast evident in his story of Katrina evacuees compared to the story of Katrina evacuees related by social worker Daphne S. Cain after Cain reflected on her Baton Rouge, Louisiana, work immediately after the hurricane. Cain found that students at Louisiana State University, where she taught at the time, "did not want to discuss the hurricane," but rather wanted to resume their usual routines and go on with life (30). So factors of time and rhetorical situation may partly explain the very different perspective, a pro-storytelling perspective, that Carl associated with the Katrina evacuees with whom he worked. Those evacuees shared not at all at once and in a classroom setting days after the disaster, but after Carl had established the financial resources to support a Hurricane Katrina-focused oral history project. Too, the oversimplified and damaging media narrative of New Orleans residents may have enhanced the motivation of some evacuees in Carl's project to share their stories.

In Carl's words, the kitchen-table-stories approach to interviewing is as follows: "Your job...as an interviewer is to surrender to the person on the other side of the mic and have them speak to you" as they would at their kitchen table, using their preferred terms. Instead of following a "questioning agenda," he wonders, "What does this person want to say?" He clarified that this "surrender" to the interviewee mattered particularly in the context of Hurricane Katrina because the survivors' stories had been "overwhelmed by this media narrative that was depicting [New Orleans residents] as deadbeats, criminals, and all sorts of other stuff. And so they wanted a chance to say how [to them] it really was. And some people wanted it for their grandchildren, and so forth and so on. But most of them said a version of 'we want people to know who we are.'" In addition to righting a perceived wrong done to their communities, the hurricane survivors conducting this research experienced personal and professional changes. To use Carl's words, they "healed" themselves through narrative and learned to act as "specialists of humanity." On a professional level, some of the evacuees went on to apply to graduate school, and some began attending conferences. Beyond this, many of the hurricane survivors maintained contact with Carl well beyond the end of their research project, leading him to open a Facebook account to keep in touch. The typical benefits of scholarly research

projects appeared, too, such as in positive recognition given to Carl's university. But the social ties and the personal and professional effects of this research project indicate an extraordinarily deep commitment to the displaced Hurricane Katrina survivors. From the beginning, Carl may or may not have felt an "*obligation* to support publicly the professional lives of those who ha[d] made [his] study possible," as John Lofty and Richard Blot put an implication of covenantal ethics (56, emphasis added). However, in ways that no researcher could have foreseen, Carl's collaborative work to document the stories of Hurricane Katrina survivors soon produced effects for people who until then had not considered themselves researchers and who may not have viewed research itself as personally significant.

OTHER RELATIONSHIPS AND COMPLICATING FACTORS

My second interviewee, a sociologist named Eve, focused on the advantageous position of the researcher to help laypeople share their stories. Additionally, Eve revealed how gender, physical and mental ability, and other identity-based factors can affect the researcher's relational moves when trying to serve lay populations. Early in her career, she had studied how U.S. military veterans at a VA hospital perceived their military experiences, work that she called activist research due to its practical and public uses. Many of the veterans whom she spoke with, men who suffered from mental health problems, didn't at first understand her role there, so they created a role for her—that of a cultural translator who could render their complicated personal experiences intelligible to a larger audience. She explained:

I went in as the sociologists doing a dissertation, and the *men*, having to try to incorporate me into their worldview somehow, decided that I was going to be the translator of their experience to the broader public. So *they* put me in that role, which I had not really thought about. But that's what my academic writing then became, a way not only of being a sociologist but of trying to help make sense of their experiences and bring it to the broader public.

When I asked her to elaborate, she responded, "[The veterans] saw themselves as not understood, and, you know, they didn't know what a sociologist was, so they had to come up with some way to make sense

of this, you know, little sociologist following them around—because I wasn't a clinician. I wasn't their therapist. I wasn't there for that, and I was asking them all these questions." Granted that the veterans did indeed speak to her for hours on end and gave her qualitative data that would support her later grant proposals for resources for rural veterans, but that data sharing happened on the veterans' terms, not only with their language as was the case with Carl's hurricane survivors who fought a powerful and damaging media narrative, but also with the veterans' interpretation of Eve's role in relation to themselves. The veterans' construction of Eve's role adds to what scholars across disciplines are learning about veterans' openness to reimagining themselves (Schell and Kleinbart 10). Eve's comments about the veterans' constructions of *her*, and her resulting sense of herself as the "little sociologist following them around," raise the possibility that a mix of credential recognition and identity factors like gender, and possibly age, shape the researcher's relationship to those he or she studies.

Conversely, by the time Eve worked as a full-time sociologist in Houston, the situation reversed, with her academic status sufficing to pave the way for new academic-lay connections. Studying a community of Houston photographers, she interacted with the photographers as well with curators and photo festival organizers. In doing so, she found that she could tie their work to scholarly subfields like visual sociology and to her university's visual studies program. And as a university faculty member studying a nonacademic (although specialized in this case) population, she could nudge her institution toward community awareness and involvement. Besides her networking strategy, her very position as a university-employed scholar studying local nonacademic populations proved valuable.

If age was a subtle barrier initially separating Eve from the military veterans whom she interviewed for her dissertation research, it played a central role in the recent locally focused research of my next interviewee, Frieda, an ethnomusicologist who had spent years studying culturally marginalized musicians in Europe. Frieda encountered new difficulties, among them a generational gap, when studying a group of younger avant-garde musicians in the city where we live because her age, as opposed to possibly concealable markers

like scholarly credentials, marked her as an outsider. Like Eve, Frieda had to get to know her possible research subjects on their own terms, which in this case entailed gradually entering the world of the the avant-garde musicians and discussing her scholarly research if or when prompted. Part of how she built rapport came through her musical playing and verbal interactions:

It was the strength of—the way that I was playing and interacting as a performer, which meant that I was getting invitations to come and jam at people’s houses. And these were not older people. They were like aged 30 at the time. And so it was quite exciting actually and unexpected that, you know, my personal interest would coincide, with a, kind of, at a certain level of sociability.

At any time, she had to be prepared to give what ethnomusicologists call a “cocktail-party explanation” of their work (see, e.g., Nettl), which meant “be[ing] ready with a lot of very short sentences to introduce ideas about music that are unusual and unexpected in many different ways,” this as a way to get people “comfortable and interested” in her research. Although an older academic, she maximized those interests that she shared with the young musicians, and she made her differences from them available upon request.

What the avant-garde musicians wanted from her, as a researcher, was a variant of what the other research participants wanted: visibility, presumably of a kind that they could co-control. In this specific case, the musicians sought “to be recognized for this [musical] project that they were involved in.” Frieda made this happen and generated data for her scholarly study by being on the ground, watching and interacting comfortably with nonacademic groups. For her to enter the community that she studied, a research step that compositionist Beverly J. Moss describes as having countless varieties (158), Frieda had to tailor her communication about her specialization area to them and help them in ways that they would recognize and appreciate immediately, including by performing with and doing programming for them.

My final two interviewees, sociologist Haley and folklorist Lenny, illustrate different ends of the critical and covenantal relational

moves that I draw from for my locally focused historical research. Haley was the most recent of my interviewees to enter her academic specialization area, sociology, while Lenny was completing his career in academe. Haley, who had studied homeless groups in the city, most boldly accepted critical theory and advocacy’s tenet of “promoting the needs and interests of those being researched,” to return to Lofty and Blot’s review of theories of moral behavior. For compositionists, an equivalent approach is critical ethnography, which encourages people to define their own experiences (Schroeder 54–55) with an eye toward exposing injustices in how the people are perceived or treated (Gorzelsky 73; Brooke and Hogg 117). My interviewee Lenny, meanwhile, showed the feeling of mutual obligation characterizing covenantal ethics—indeed, revealing striking outcomes of that sense of obligation, an extent of mutual involvement that I think many scholars in and beyond rhetoric and composition have not considered.

Haley, like Carl, Eve, and Frieda, underscored the theme of the researched, here homeless people, wanting to be heard:

I think especially when you work with underserved populations, you get a lot less barriers because they, the people, like, they want you to pay attention to them because they’re an underserved population They want to be seen. *They want to tell their story.* I mean, I have, for instance, homeless people tell me, like, “thank you so much. Like, no one has ever asked me this before.” (emphasis mine)

She observed that the same appreciation came from leaders of activist organizations whom she worked with, leaders who stand to benefit from free publicity. As this kind of point recurred throughout my interviews, I was reminded of the researcher’s power of selection, of identifying a population to study or a topic to investigate, in creating a platform for a nonacademic community to gain visibility.

Just as important as she planned and implemented her first study was Haley’s own social status. When she first contacted homeless shelters about her study, she attributed her confidence to her status as a grad student, explaining, “I guess it’s like the credibility of saying, like, ‘I’m not just some weirdo that wants to interview you people.

Like, I'm in grad school, and this is a project and, you know, it's going to change the world [*chuckling*].” Once she obtained a full-time faculty position at a college and completed research for a book that she coauthored, she discovered more about what institutional and disciplinary credibility meant to her:

I feel like there's something about having . . . the credentials and the facts that that research brings that allows me to be more convincing than someone that doesn't. So the fact that I not only understand it from the activist standpoint, but that I can then be like, “but it really is true as we found in this paper or as documented in this study that I've been a part of.” So it's almost like the research is a springboard for starting conversations, be those on the internet or in person or with coworkers or whatever, that gives me some legitimacy to make real improvements in the lives of people.

When I asked her for an example of “real improvements,” she explained that currently she is lobbying to expand her college's nondiscrimination policy in a way that reflects her book's argument. So throughout her research-based experiences, she found that her institutional and disciplinary affiliations legitimized her conversations with marginalized local groups and strengthened her advocacy for policy changes. Although some academics have separated their work from the work of activists and public relations specialists (see, e.g., Fish), Haley saw her scholarly work as also activist.

Finally, my interview with Lenny showed that one's research on a local nonacademic community can transform the research's significance and effects. As all my interviewees had said or implied, and as feminist rhetoricians especially have argued (e.g., Royster 281), scholarly research should help the people whom it concerns. But Lenny fleshed out what such help may mean in a way that takes the responsibility discussed by Lofty and Blot much further. Lenny's professional background was as follows: terminal degree from an English department although he took graduate classes from faculty specializing in folklore. Then, as a higher education faculty member in Houston, he taught composition and other English classes while his publications branched out to other areas. He began studying

local community members after he completed his dissertation and decided to write an article about a specific musical genre and for both specialized and lay readers. With this project in mind, he attended an academic conference where he met a photographer who had published books on the same musical genre. Remarking that the photographer's work lacked pictures of musicians from Houston, Lenny persuaded him to travel multiple times to Houston and photograph the overlooked musicians as Lenny interviewed them. Lenny enjoyed this interview process, and he thought the musicians did, too. It seemed to him that the musicians had been waiting for someone to say, "Tell me your story."

But it was Lenny and the photographer's next actions that invited the musicians to make new meaning from their interactions with Lenny and the photographer, in effect changing Lenny's relationship to their community and broadening the function of his research project. One such action taken by Lenny and the photographer was to give extra copies of their photos to the musicians and the musicians' family members. Lenny continued,

I realized how much this facilitated goodwill in the . . . community, because after interviewing them and photographing them, I would contact them months later and say, "I need to come by your house. I've got something to give you." And I'm taking these beautiful photographs And these people are just knocked away [sic]. They—a lot of them have been musicians their whole life, and they had photos of themselves but never photos like this. And they'd never had anyone take their photo and then give them high-quality prints.

This action departed from the custom of past scholars who had studied this community, completed their research, and promptly left, and it became one way for the musicians to stay involved in and attached to Lenny's book. Also, for the subsequent book launch, Lenny and the photographer hired a band, encouraged the musicians featured in the book to attend and pick up their copy of the book, and promoted the event on local radio stations. But what happened next surprised them all: their work itself became the community's "memory book."

Here I quote Lenny at length to illustrate the vastness of this literacy ecology:

We had about 400 people show up. [A book promoter] sold out his books. There were hundreds of people there. And the musicians were getting their books. And they didn't give a— and I say this with affection—[the musicians] didn't really care about getting my signature or [the photographer's] signature. They were going around to the other musicians to get their signatures on their photos like a high school yearbook. Laypeople were coming in, buying the book, and some of them, of course, were buying it and getting the author to sign it; some of them did care about that. But then they—they're in this room where most of the people in the book are right there in that room with them. And they're going around and getting people to sign it. And that led to something . . . that's just phenomenal. For years, I'd be out somewhere, and someone would come up and show me his or her copy of [the book], which was just full of signatures. I mean, I always told them the same thing: "Your book is more of a collector item than my copy" because I wouldn't have all those signatures in my book.

Lenny added, "It was almost like we [he and the photographer] were just riding a wave. It wasn't like we were powering this thing." To this day, the book circulates at performance venues in the city. Lenny's account recalls Richard Louth's story in the 2008 *Reflections* special issue of a Hurricane Katrina-focused blog leading to radio broadcasts and then to an anthology that inspired a larger National Writing Project-funded printing, enhanced visibility from the National Council of Teachers of English, a review in a prominent New Orleans newspaper, and further exposure. Louth wrote that his project "grew organically from blog to radio program to anthology as we realized how important the writing was and as we found new resources for making our work public" (29). My interview with Lenny fleshed out some of the social dimensions of a comparable publication, for Lenny stayed connected to the musicians in his book in concrete ways: he assisted some of them with personal matters, he received invitations to attend funerals in their community, and he recommended people from their community for local projects. Occasionally, he acted as a

middleman between the musicians and producers interested in their work. It is no exaggeration to say that he stayed involved in many of the community members' daily concerns and life-changing events.

A final point that I find valuable about Lenny's research in local communities is that it influenced his teaching of first-year composition. He encouraged his first-year composition students to interview local people and undertake research with unpublished materials. One student with family ties to the same community of musicians that Lenny had studied interviewed a romantic partner of a prominent Houston musician. Another student studied a psychedelic band in the area. Other students, building on their cultural backgrounds, studied topics such as Vietnamese weddings and a Vietnamese Catholic nunnery in the city. In sum, his students were producing "research-based nonfiction" on focused and little-known local topics, many of which overlapped his research area and generated insights for him: "Students who picked topics where I was doing things on my own, I could give them suggestions of whom to interview or where to look, and sometimes I referred them to things I'd already published and say, 'there's stuff in there.' But it also gave me insight on [research] I'd done or was doing." Moreover, his students accepted suggestions from him to circulate their work in their communities.

Whether rhetoric and composition scholars do research like that of Lenny and my other interviewees, I believe we too should examine how our knowledge transcends disciplinary boundaries and obtains new meanings and uses through its interaction with local community members, starting with general education students in first-year composition. We can do this even if initially we did not view our research as activist or covenantal in orientation and even if our disciplinary conventions focus us on archived texts before living people.

LINKING LOCAL RESEARCH ON COMPOSITION HISTORY TO NONSPECIALISTS

I conclude with a brief pedagogical application for those of us doing textual research. We in composition history have only recently begun bringing our archival research to the attention of first-year

composition students. For example, in her 2015 *College Composition and Communication* article, Wendy Hayden explains that her students read archival research tips from compositionists, analyzed archived documents from their college, and reflected on the politics of representation. As a result, the students revised their initial research questions, sidestepped easy conclusions, and articulated personal connections to their college's activist legacy. Based on their writing, Hayden advocates a writing-about-research approach to composition in order to "reconfigure how we think about a pedagogy for undergraduate research" (422). I, too, support a writing-about-research approach, but with the important caveats that the approach should let newcomers to research explore how research affects the communities and cultures in which they claim membership (thus extending the personal connection making that Hayden considers), and the approach should encourage newcomers to do different things with the research than the researcher likely expected. Much as the musicians whom Lenny studied turned his study into a sort of yearbook, first-year composition students might investigate new genres and uses for scholarly articles about composition history, particularly if the articles situate composition history in cities or regions known by the students. If not dealing with research in published form but with generative questions and in-process data collection, students can explore new audiences for and ways of using a given primary text. Whatever the practice's exact version, the point is for students to learn about what researchers do while using the students' own community affiliations to re-see a research project's possible goals and effects.

Each of the scholars whom I interviewed reveals ideas that this approach to first-year composition could take up. Though they interpreted their professional identities slightly differently, the cases of Eve, who studied prisoners, and Haley, who studied homeless people, encourage us to inquire into how our status as college faculty or students, people with official ties to disciplines or to higher education institutions, affects how authorized we feel to use primary or secondary texts about composition history. The case of Frieda, who traversed a generational gap between herself and a group of young local musicians, prompts us to entertain the possibility that in order for students to make texts about historical college student writing relevant to other people in the students' communities, the

students may first need to analyze social boundaries separating them from their communities’ leaders. The cases of Carl, who studied and eventually worked alongside hurricane survivors, and of Lenny, who studied another group of local musicians, give us starting points for working with the fact that traditional parameters placed around the concepts of *researcher* and *research project* may not—even should not—hold at all times, for all individuals in the surrounding literacy ecology. If we consider Carl’s case alongside Daphne S. Cain’s published account of her changing emotional outlook and research agenda after Hurricane Katrina, we see many possible degrees of connection between one who does research and one who is part of a researched community. First-year composition students as well as their instructors may occupy generative social spaces between the familiar categories of outsider and insider, higher education member and local community member.

More basically, we might approach our interactions with students about textual, historical research through questions like the following:

- What most interests or surprises our first-year composition students about primary historical texts from our academic institution or from another institution connected to the students’ communities?
- What stories do our current students or their community peers want to tell, as opposed to stories that established composition historians have already told about what it means or has meant to be a student or writer there?
- How can we and our current students relax the categories of *researcher* and *researched* long enough for us to inhabit both identities?

Research on composition history already connects to current undergraduate students and other community members particularly in the cities, neighborhoods, and regions where the research is focused. The challenge is for current students and other community members to see how, and then for these groups to see what we, as college teachers

and scholars, have overlooked about that information's importance. Long term, the challenge will be to grow our interactions outside university boundaries to the point of letting us understand how populations without college connections see, might see, and want to see their identities in relation to our institutions and research.

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NOTES

- 1 My first interviewee, Carl Lindahl, freely consented in writing to my using his real name. I used pseudonyms for my other interviewees.

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