Foreword. What Do We Want from Community Writing?

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I write this foreword at a moment when the climate in which we live is especially heated, both literally and figuratively. The planet warms and climate disasters increase while global action remains timid and piecemeal; U.S. neighborhoods remain segregated by race and income, which means so do our schools; borders and national boundaries breed tension and increased stigma and punishment of immigrants and refugees. Rifts widen between left and right politically, between those who value democracy and those who prefer order at any cost, between those who rely on science and vaccines and those who harbor distrust and fear, between those who see masks as a way for caring for self and others and those who equate masks with weakness and diminished freedom. Further heated rifts widen over issues like reproductive health, sexual assault, gender identity, sexual orientation, rights of people with disabilities, religion, ethnic identities, language policies. The list goes on and on. Underneath and fueling this rancor rests a bedrock of deep systemic inequality that for generations has tipped the scales in favor of those who are white and wealthy while punishing and harming bodies that are indigenous, black, and brown.

Can community writing help make this divided world a kinder, less oppressive place?

Positive social change is undoubtedly the *intention* of most if not all community-writing projects. At its heart, community writing projects accept that the world is imperfect, damaged, off-kilter, and at the same time seek to *do something* that brings a little change, a bit of positivity into a wounded world.

I was drawn to the work of community writing more than two decades ago because of its mix of utopian ambition and pragmatic project orientation. I longed to foster writing that acted as an agent in the world that strived to make it a little bit better. In *Tactics of Hope* (2005), I chronicled several community projects that provided income, a sense of community, and a public platform for adults and children experiencing homelessness, projects that gave writers support and audiences to tell stories and advocate for themselves and others. I argued that community-based work, then typically described as *service learning*, suffered a mismatch between the theories guiding it, which touted the value of reciprocity and collaboration, and many practices that focused more on the university's needs and student learning outcomes while paying less careful attention to the needs, values, and experiences of community partners.

In the past decade, much has changed to help make community writing projects even more ethical and accountable, including the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) issuing and revising the CCCC Statement on Community-Engaged Projects in Rhetoric and Composition[1] that outlines best practices in community-engaged work. The Coalition for Community Writing[2] (CCW) formed in 2015, has hosted three well-attended conferences, drawing a diverse group of scholars and community members from far and wide, and sponsors an annual award for outstanding community projects that helps to highlight innovative and equitably focused community projects. It also offers mentoring and support to all involved in community work, with a special focus on BIPOC emerging scholars.

Despite this necessary and valuable progress, community writing—as all writing—still suffers from inevitable blind spots that limit the value of this work or cause it to run counter to its intended aims. In *Mindful of Race: Transforming Racism for the Inside Out*, international teacher of meditation Ruth King describes the way that limited vision affects all people:

Common to all of us is the fact that we don't see the world as it is but how we have been conditioned to see it. The delusion we carry is that everyone sees—or should see—the world as we do. What we see or don't see has consequences. In general, white people do not see race unless they feel threatened or until someone brings it to their attention (2005, p. 65).

While everyone shares a partial and imperfect view of the world, the structures of power and privilege unequally fall to those who are white, who have money, are able-bodied, cis-gendered, heterosexual, young, and male. While the structures of inequality are multiple, one's ability to see and discuss race and whiteness, and King points out, is especially harmful and below the surface of one's day-to-day knowledge. White people (and I identify as white) can easily avoid issues of race, racism, and white supremacy, because the power and privileges we are afforded are often below the level of conscious noticing. White supremacy is our very culture—like fish in a pond, where are swimming in it, and can be barely aware of it.

Asao Inoue at his CCCC's 2019 Chair's address spoke directly about the deep ways that white supremacy structures our field and limits what is possible based on the bodies we inhabit. After first specifically addressing his "colleagues of color," he turned to specifically speak to the white majority in the audience: "I'm not going to say that you—you White folks in this room—are the special ones. You thinking you're special is the problem. It always has been, because you, and White people just like you who came before you, have had most of the power, decided most of the things, built the steel cage of White language supremacy that we exist in today, both in and outside of the academy—and likely, many of you didn't know you did it." Inoue argues that assumptions of white supremacy underscore

1. https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/community-engaged
2. https://communitywriting.org/

what we uncritically adopt as commonsense and good writing. His words immediately and afterward caused discomfort and push back by some white scholars who felt singled out. While I sat with this critique and found it necessary for me to think deeply about what I assume or take for granted, I saw Inoue's talk as a gift, a necessary wake-up call from a friend and ally. I especially held to the following words:

> Just as it is unfair that in our world most indigenous, Latinx, and Black Americans will never get the chance to do what we do, to be teachers, or professors, or researchers, or something else that taps their own potentials because of the racist steel bars set around them, it is equally unfair that you [White scholars and teachers] perpetuate racism and White language supremacy not just through your words and actions, but through your body in a place like this or in your classrooms, despite your better intentions. Let me repeat that to compassionately urge you to sit in some discomfort: White people can perpetuate White supremacy by being present. You can perpetuate White language supremacy through the presence of your bodies in places like this.

Hurt and harm happen, no matter how good the intentions are. We remember that our intentions do not always mirror our impact. Students and community members with a history of racial trauma might see me, my white body, as threatening or traumatizing. That is a truth I need to sit with and deeply consider: how can community projects minimize harm and offer more than feel-good gestures? How can community writing address the systems of inequality and not merely bolster the status quo?

No single book can hope to address the harms of a culture built on systems of oppression. Any book that makes such grand claims should be suspect. But Aimée Knight's *Community is the Way: Engaged Writing and Design for Transformative Change* offers a method for working to engage in community writing more equitably by asking deep and important questions. First and foremost, this book does not see *community* as a noun, an entity that already exists, but instead frames community as an action, a goal. Partnerships *aim to build community*. It can happen, with a lot of care and work, but it's not a foregone conclusion. One must see the multiple audiences even within a single nonprofit and ask questions like Whose public? Whose idea of good? For whom? Who decides? "The public good" is contested and shifting, and work that enters that arena must be prepared to take sides.

Additionally innovative in Knight's work is deep and skilled engagement with the tools of social networking, web platforms, and public storytelling. This is the work that all advocacy organizations need but often lack the capacity to do well. It's a space where writing and digital literacy skills can help achieve the project that a created community defines.

To seek to forge and create community requires both intellectual and internal work. Knight outlines the steps for what she calls *equity-based approaches* in community writing: an inquiry that prioritizes the need of the community, building empathy, co-creating knowledge, researching, composing and recomposing, testing and revision, and evaluating capacity. These are important and useful ideas, a North Star, as she calls it, values that serve less as goals but more as questions that prompt us "to do better work with our partners to build more just and transformative worlds." I like this structure because it frames all work as questing and imperfect. It's not a question of *if* we make mistakes but *when* and *what will we do in response when we make them*?

The gaps between intention and impact, what we think we're doing and what we are actually doing, especially when the "we" are people with more racial, economic, and cultural capital than the community members with whom we work are deep, complex, and not easy to reconcile. Rather than seeking to eliminate or ignore them, I believe we need to sit with and become curious and open to facing these gaps, the failures, the ways we fall short, if we are going to do work that does more than uphold the status quo. Inoue encourages "sitting with" our discomfort, engaging mindfully and intentionally with the ways that white supremacy structures the world we inhabit. "Because racism is so intricately woven into our social fabric, it is difficult to both discern and discuss. Yet, fundamental to understanding our habits of harm is understanding and contemplating the stained soil of racism and racial trauma in US history" (King, 2018, p. 43).

Understanding and contemplating. Two of the tools that Ruth King offers as necessary for starting to create empathy and the kind of community that this book hopes to build: both intellectual mind and embodied awareness. We need to engage intellectually to understand our own privileges and the blind spots that our situatedness encourages. But we also need a deep and ongoing contemplative practice that helps us build the embodied capacity to sit with discomfort, an ability to learn poise, readiness, to act without reactivity, at least that's where my current writing keeps leading me again and again. Contemplative work can help us build the emotional resilience necessary to allow us to enter spaces bravely and calmly; to become curious and open to difference and changing our minds; to communicate directly with honesty, respect, and compassion; to speak up when we feel hurt and listen with an open spirit when we cause hurt; to listen, stay curious, seeking facts, ideas, and new possibilities; to invite healing through forgiveness and making amends. And most of all, we acknowledge that when we fail, we will try again.

Ultimately, there is no end goal to justice work. We are not called on to complete it, nor are we exempted from its responsibility. Layla Saad (2020) writes, "There is no feel-good reward at the end other than the knowledge that you are doing this because it's the right thing to do. . . You won't get any ally cookies for it. You won't be celebrated for it. You will have to learn to wean yourself off the addiction to instant gratification and instead develop a consciousness for doing

what is right even if nobody ever thanks you for it" (pp. 25-26). Jacqueline Jones Royster (2017) invokes the metaphor of a relay race as a way to view her role in the struggle for justice—she runs her leg as fully as she can and then passes the baton forward, trusting the work will go on. And while we continue running, may we be fueled by models and methods like Aimée Knight's, as we seek to unlearn, learn, grow, and organize toward equity.

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