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Editor's Introduction: A Spotlight on Marginalized Communities

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Bienvenidos! Welcome!

I am excited to present the 2018 issue of *Open Words* (*OW*) that features Octavio Pimentel, Professor from the Masters in Rhetoric and Composition Program in the Department of English at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas, as our invited contributor. The scholars, practitioners, and graduate students who contributed to this issue engage in scholarship that speaks to access for marginalized communities. Personally, each contributor offered me an opportunity to reflect on my academic journey. In educational environments, adequate access can be a difficult achievement for marginalized communities, especially along the U.S.–México border. In such settings, many Latinx have had to struggle with the erasure of their ethnicities and histories (López, 1997; García & Castro, 2011; San Miguel, 2013). As someone who identifies as Latinx, I invest in providing access for underserved and underrepresented populations and their communities, especially in a political climate when alt-right radical conservatives are vindicated and validated for their speech or actions against people of color, emboldened by President Donald J. Trump's racist rhetoric. So, before I introduce contributions in this issue, please permit me to share, spotlighting the marginalized communities I came from and the challenges I faced to access education.

I was a first-generation student, born and raised in rural south Texas. Most of my growing up time was spent on the King Ranch, owned by Captain Richard King.

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Covering over 850,000 acres, the King Ranch is the largest ranch in Texas (*Maps – King Ranch* 2018). My mother's parents were Kineños, Captain King's people who lived and worked on the ranch. Moving from the Lower Rio Grande Valley, my father's parents settled in Kingsville, the small community named after Capitan King and only established when his wife, Henrietta King, designated a portion of ranch land for purchase and the construction of a railroad near the ranch (*About Kingsville* 2016). This cultural setting was the backdrop of my youth. I am the eldest son and grandson in a Mexican American/Latino-Kineño household, the first to graduate from high school and college and the first to go beyond those expectations of me.

In my community, where my father and mother experienced a racially segregated education, I had access to public education, but my ethnicity limited that access. My white guidance counselor in high school tended to advise Latinx students to withdraw from high school because she felt Latinx students did not need further education. She and I would occasionally meet not to discuss college but to discuss how withdrawing from school would serve my best interests. Despite my low grades, I could not drop out of school. I resisted her advice, and in my fifth year, I graduated from high school. However, part of that achievement was not based on my own merits. That achievement was due, in part, to an altered final grade in English. Altered how you may ask? Well, even though I had failed English, my teacher, also white, changed my final grade from failing to passing at the last minute. As a result, I was now eligible and graduated with the class of 1990. Years later, after earning my B.A., I substituted for that English teacher, and she confirmed the grade alteration publicly. She used that alteration and me as an example for her entire class. As I recall, she said, "All of you Latinos can succeed too, if you just apply yourself despite your limited circumstances." However, was I a success? Maybe, given such a shaming, I did not feel like I had accomplished anything with a college degree.

In my community, there was a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), Texas A&I University that later became Texas A&M University at Kingsville. This university was situated on the road between Kingsville and King Ranch, but I was never expected, either from school counselors or my parents, that I would enroll in college someday. In my household, we never spoke about the possibility of attending college. Also, we never acknowledged the university we passed by daily on the way to the ranch. I admit that at the time I did not even realize what going to college involved or why going to college would be important. Yet, on a whim, a friend and I visited the campus one day, during the summer after graduating from high school. That day was the first time I had set foot on university grounds, and she and I were registered--just like that. How? She and I entered the registration building by accident, and a gentleman asked if we

wanted to go to college. We said, with no confidence whatsoever, "Sure." So, he filled out all the paperwork and designated me a Kinesiology major, and a week later, another individual filled out all the financial aid paperwork. Complete. All that was left to do was to show up for classes.

Eight years. That's how long it took me to earn my B.A. degree in Theatre Arts. While in college, I excelled in math and science, but I felt like my achievement in these areas was also an unexpected occurrence from students like me, a brown boy from the local community. Once, a professor accused me of cheating when I earned a perfect score on a business math exam. I had sat in the front row, and I was the last student to leave during the exam. Yet, the professor insisted that I had cheated. Someone like me could not have done so well.

How could I possibly do well, given these low expectations? Even though I was attending an HSI meant to serve students like me, I regularly faced low expectations, an implicit message that my time at the university was temporary. Any strengths I had were challenged, and all my weaknesses fulfilled those low expectations. Reading and writing were weaknesses for me in college. I had to enroll in developmental reading and writing classes several times. Looking back, I can understand why I was unsuccessful in such courses, especially writing. Instructors did not teach writing; instructors only pointed out my mistakes. Conversations that took place in my writing classes centered on the premise that we, Latinx students, were first, bad writers who could not complete a simple sentence; second, students who were unable to understand how the writing process works; and third, people who were unable to write in an academic voice, or rather could not learn how to say it right. I stayed away from those intensive writing courses until my sister enrolled for college. With her, I had a partner. We enrolled in writing courses together, and we passed, in part, because we helped each other with writing in academic settings.

After graduation, I enrolled in graduate school at the same institution. I earned an M.A. degree in Guidance and Counseling, a two-year program that took me four years to complete because I had to work full-time for the State of Texas as I completed my degree. At the time, I thought this degree would help me gain social mobility in my employment for the State of Texas. But supervisors stressed that I was too young to hold any supervisory position even though I was already performing the duties assigned to a supervisor. So, I left my employment with the State of Texas, and I decided to return to graduate school. This time, however, I enrolled at Texas A&M University in Corpus Christi, another HSI located nearby. There, I earned my second M.A. degree, this time in English and completed within three years, and on the encouragement by professors, I decided to see if teaching writing would be something

that I would like to do. I figured that I might have something to offer all those students, who like me, were dismissed, alienated, or found themselves in unexpected circumstances after enrolling for college. Eventually, on advice from faculty, I went for my Ph.D. Despite my financial burden from student loans of the previous degrees, I realized for the first time that earning a Ph.D. was possible. The Ph.D. was the logical next step on my academic journey and to secure, hopefully, that coveted tenure-track position teaching. I figured this degree would give me access to apply to four-year institutions, not as contingent faculty but as tenure-line faculty. So, I traveled north to the University of Texas at San Antonio to begin a doctoral program. It took me nine years, and throughout my studies, I taught writing full-time at a community college, often taking on course overloads to pay for tuition and bills.

Twenty-five years. From 1990 to 2015, I was a first-generation college student, and since then, I have learned many things. I felt like I was not shapeshifting in cultural, linguistic, and intellectual terms, as Juan C. Guerra describes in his definition of "transcultural repositioning" (15), a strategy used by many underrepresented students. No, I don't believe that I self-regulated my rhetorical practices between and among different languages, dialects, classes, or cultures. How could I really? As a first-generation student, I would be unable to shift into shapes or forms or linguistics because those literacy practices were ones I did not recognize. The ability to reposition oneself assumes that I had some familiarity with the forms I was encountering or that I had previously mastered such forms in order to be able to shift among them.

By contrast, any of my successes were based on trial, error, and happenstance. It was only by chance that I entered college, and it was only through lucky mentorship, employment dissatisfaction, and personal persistence that I advanced from one degree to the next. In sum, I had to learn how to access and navigate academic settings, a central concern of the contributors for this 2018 issue of *OW*. Contributors spotlight the forms of access available to marginalized and/or novice communities. When I look back at my academic journey, I wish I had joined Latinx interest organizations. I wish I had encountered more practitioners who were attentive to marginalized students. I wish I had known about community education programs. I wish I had known how to utilize social media technologies for self-promotion and professionalization. Also, I wish I had encountered more alt-pedagogies that promoted acts of self-reflection. So, now, without further delay, let me introduce the contributions made to this issue of *OW*.

Octavio Pimentel opens with "Counter Stories: Brotherhood in a Latinx Fraternity." Pimentel reveals how academic success for poor Latinx students is possible when these students join social organizations that will help them access social

networking and essential literacy recourses. Because the Latinx population will represent three out of every ten persons by 2050, such growth may result in increased numbers of Latinx attending and graduating college. So, he calls on educators to pay attention to Latinx students more closely, specifically to increase graduation and reduce attrition rates. In this article, Pimentel describes a qualitative study on Gamma Zeta Alpha, a Latinx-interest academic fraternity. This study critically challenges mainstream narratives that construct "poor Latinx students as ill prepared for college and thus destined to fail academically in college." As part of countering these narratives, Gamma Zeta Alpha maintains a 90% graduation rate, according to Pimentel, and provides the support system that many Latinx students need to reach academic success. Therefore, Pimentel spotlights for us a counter story, a "new" narrative that shows the potential of fostering Latinx student success, especially when these students join organizations like Gamma Zeta Alpha.

Next, Victoria Ramirez Gentry and Sonya Eddy reframe the work we do, as practitioners, to increase inclusion. Ramirez Gentry, a student seeking a Master of Arts degree at Texas A&M University at Corpus Christi, offers us a unique hands-on perspective in "Recognizing Deaf Writers as Second Language Learners: Transforming the Approach to Working with ASL Speakers in the Writing Center." She demonstrates how a skilled, thoughtful, and attentive writing consultant can develop important findings. She shares lived experiences working with a deaf writer at the Center for Academic Student Achievement (CASA) Writing Center on campus. Plus, she reflects on the training she received at the center and her experience working with this deaf writer who communicated with American Sign Language (ASL). Working with second language learners (L2) and coming from a multilingual environment, Ramirez Gentry finds similarities in her approach of working with deaf and L2 writers. She takes a courageous position to reveal for readers her own vulnerability in working with this deaf writer: "I had failed to make explicit connections between the writer's first language, ASL, and her second language, English." Through her experience as a writing consultant and through her experience in writing this article, Ramirez Gentry has learned "not to scan through papers for errors, but to examine thoughtfully the writer's choices."

Next, Sonya Eddy turns our attention to community education for social transformation. In "Deliberative Acts in Reclaiming the Hays Street Bridge in San Antonio," Eddy presents a case study of a community engagement project that turned the Hays Street Bridge complex in San Antonio, Texas to a public space. The community-motivated revitalization effort was led by the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center (EPJC), which organized a public education program called Puentes de Poder

(PDP). Eddy focuses on how this historic Hays Street Bridge represents a lifeline to marginalized, low social-economic communities. She examines how the EPJC in the PDP program augmented the deliberation process, instrumental in enabling the expression of community cultural identity. Through the program, the EPJC established ways for marginalized groups to access rhetoric as deliberative acts to promote community action. In her examination, she reveals several interconnections between the PDP program and the rhetorical process called el camino de la mestiza/the mestiza way, advocated by Chicana feminists.

Next, Christopher D. M. Andrews brings our attention to the integral role that social media technologies can play for developing social networks for novice and emerging professionals. In "Professionalism *in vivo*: Graduate Students on Facebook," Andrews highlights how social media technologies, as a resource for professionalization, serve graduate students, who are on the fringe of the professorate. His study reveals how doctoral students can utilize Facebook not only for social networking but also for professional, academic networking. Andrews concludes that Facebook offers graduate students access to a network of scholars, an ability to learn and inhabit academic roles, as well as opportunities to enter professional communities. He indicates that graduate students can use Facebook as a tool for cultivating professional networks and for engaging in self-sponsored moments of professionalism and mentoring.

Next, in "'It's Essentially Writers Talking about Writing': The Roles of Reflection in a Co-Curricular Writing Studio Course," Jerrice Donelson, Anthony DeGenaro, and William DeGenaro discuss how alt-pedagogies, such as writing studios that represent co-curricular, small, student-centered spaces, can provide students with opportunities for reflection about writing and the writing process. Their contribution highlights how students who encounter difficulty can thrive when given opportunities to reflect and receive additional support. By examining how students use self-reflection, the authors assert that writing studios aid students with becoming more aware of themselves as writers. Such reflection, in turn, offers students an opportunity to "access the metacognition of different writing events in order to foster the transfer of knowledge from those writing events in their course." An added benefit from their study is that studios have a particular utility in pedagogical settings where open-admissions take place.

Finally, new to this *OW* issue are book reviews. Six book review contributors share their insights on some more recent publications.

In closing, this 2018 issue of *OW* spotlights how marginalized communities struggle with access. These contributors share strategies for how practitioners can, in their daily praxis, provide forms of access to those communities. This issue provided me with further insight on how best to serve marginalized communities, insights our readers may gain as well. The contributors offered me ways to fulfill my call to empower underserved and underrepresented populations as well as to learn how best to create participatory communities. Despite the limited access I encountered throughout my academic journey, I graduated from high school and managed to earn four college degrees. I carry that knowledge with me when I enter the classroom and when I encounter students who can relate to my experiences, students in whom I invest wholeheartedly.

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