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## Interview with Steve Parks

*Jennifer Hitchcock*

### Abstract

Jennifer Hitchcock interviews community activist and director of Syracuse University's Composition and Cultural Rhetoric doctoral program, Steve Parks. They discuss Parks's working-class background, career path, influences, and activism. Parks also considers the direction of the field of composition and rhetoric and expresses optimism for the future.

### Introduction

Steve Parks is an accomplished composition and rhetoric scholar, teacher, and community activist, and he currently serves as the director of Syracuse University's Composition and Cultural Rhetoric doctoral program. He received his doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh in 1994 with a dissertation focused on the history of the 1974 CCCCs' "Students' Right to Their Own Language" statement, a revised version of which was published in book form as *Class Politics: The Movement for "The Students' Right to Their Own Language"* as part of NCTE's Refiguring English Studies series.

While an assistant professor at Temple University from 1997 to 2004, Parks directed New City Writing: A Research Institute for the Study and Practice of Literature, Literacy, and Culture, and he founded New City Community Press (NCCP) in 1998. NCCP publishes a variety of community literacy collections about urban life, local culture, economic rights, and social justice, giving local communities the opportunity to tell their own stories and have their voices address important national and global issues. Among its other work, NCCP also publishes the peer-reviewed academic journal, *Reflections: A Journal of Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing, and Service Learning*, for which Parks has also served as an editor.

In recent years, much of Parks's scholarship has focused on how writing and the field of composition and rhetoric can promote social change and grassroots activism. Parks and Eli Goldblatt discuss the ways that WAC programs can serve as productive locations for writing programs to connect with local communities in "Writing

Beyond the Curriculum.” The idea of “writing beyond the curriculum” is further explored in his 2010 book, *Gravyland: Writing Beyond the Curriculum in the City of Brotherly Love*. In “Sinners Welcome: The Limits of Rhetorical Agency,” he draws on Cornel West’s concept of “prophetic pragmatism” and Parks’ own experiences with a community publishing project to argue that the field must move beyond mere discussion of progressive social values and a focus on the rhetorical agency of marginalized groups to instead do more to actually participate in collective action and real political organizing. And in “Strategic Speculations on the Question of Value: The Role of Community Publishing in English Studies,” Parks examines a problematic community publishing project and argues that the “use-value” of texts must be more of a focus in the field. Through discussion of a successful international student and community writing collective in “Emergent Strategies for an Established Field: The Role of Worker Writer Collectives in Composition and Rhetoric,” Parks argues for replacing the “contact zone” with more community-based collectives or “federations.”

Throughout most of his career, Parks’s scholarship and teaching have been directly connected to activist and public rhetorics through community publishing and grassroots, collective action. While the field of composition and rhetoric has long been concerned with progressive values and educating students for democratic citizenship, Parks couples these values with on-the-ground action and a concern for the success of working-class students in the academy.

## Interview

**JH: What led you to advocate for a greater focus on collective action for political and social change initially? Was it your work with New City Community Press and community partnerships like the one you describe in “Sinners Welcome” and *Gravyland*? Or did you begin to see the importance of collective action even earlier—maybe during your graduate study at the University of Pittsburgh, as you discuss in the introduction to *Gravyland*? How did you come to believe in the importance of collective action?**

SP: I began to study composition and rhetoric right when the field was pivoting between two different historical moments. One the one hand, you had the 1960s and ‘70s, which were marked by a sense of the academic, the composition teacher, as an advocate and activist, both for students and for institutional/political change. On the other, you had in the late ‘70s and heading into the ‘80s, a real push to become a discipline, to model yourself after versions of English departments. Here scholarship was the coin of the realm, not efforts to create systemic change for working-class students entering the academy. I can remember being in graduate school in the ‘80s and experiencing that shift, noticing who I was teaching at Pitt, who was entering our graduate program compared to previous cohorts of graduate students. And this was all happening in the context of the economy in Pittsburgh shattering. A lot of my friends’ fathers and parents lost their jobs. Whole communities were wiped

out as the steel industry collapsed. I can remember admiring the steel workers and community activists who were trying, somewhat futilely, to get the steel mills to stay, but also demand that the steel mills do right by the community on their way out. And I remember admiring the communities who organized to support their children to go to college.

It struck me odd, wrong really, that the field was turning toward a more disciplinary identity when the tradition that would be most useful to the working class students in my classrooms harkened back more to the ‘60s and ‘70s. So it was that experience of entering the field at a moment when it was leaving its activist roots that led me to think, “Well, what is my responsibility as somebody who, through the support of the community, managed to go to college? What’s my responsibility to the people who didn’t have the opportunity?” And that led me to think of activism as it was characterized in the ‘60s by Geneva Smitherman, Richard Ohmann, and folks like that. That’s what led me to that set of issues.

**How do you see your current work fitting into the history of the field of composition and rhetoric? What figures and movements in the field have most influenced you? You mentioned Smitherman and what was going on at the time in the ‘60s and ‘70s, and you also cite Linda Flower in some of your work. But who and what else in comp/rhet have influenced you the most?**

It’s interesting because I believe I was at the last CCCCs that Kenneth Burke attended. Anne Berthoff was there and so was Peter Elbow—the whole set of folks who in some way were the historical predecessors to my time in the field. I was also fortunate enough to know Jim Berlin. And I studied with Bartholomae. I have been like the Forrest Gump of composition. I have always managed to know the people who played a significant part in defining the work of the field.

To a great extent, however, very few of them actually influenced my own work. In fact, for a long time, I used to let people know that I have only ever taken one composition/rhetoric course. It was a course with Bartholomae on the history of composition. I never took a basic writing seminar. I never took a WPA seminar. Never took a classical rhetoric seminar. So I don’t necessarily point back to that scholarship or those individuals as having influenced me. The people who influenced my sense of what I wanted to be as a professional were people who were the activists of the ‘60s. So, Al Haber, who nobody writes about in composition, fascinated me because as he left graduate school and became part of the academy, he helped form the New University Conference (NUC). The NUC was this interdisciplinary group of graduate students and faculty who were committed to linking their work to community and social change. I see my work as emerging much more out of that activist context than any particular composition/rhetoric scholar.

I was also in graduate school when cultural studies was dominant. So as I looked for modern theories of politics, activism, and social change, I looked to Derrida, Foucault, Spivak, to poststructuralist readings of Marx. These texts gave me a sense of how power operates, what ideology is, what agency means, what collective agency looks like in practice. They gave me a certain political definition of the university that, when coupled with a sense of 60's activism, helped me define what I took to be the work of the first-year writing class. Then, only really as a third stage in the process, did I begin to look for people in composition and rhetoric. At that point, Berlin was important to me, in part because *Rhetoric and Reality* had that social-epistemic argument which related to discussions of class and discussions of ideology. He also interested me because he was in the Marxist Literary group, which is how I met him. And once again, it was an interdisciplinary group that looked at how Marx could be used in the academy and outside of it. Geneva Smitherman intrigued me in part because of her scholarship, but also because she was active in the Black Caucus, and I was interested in how people in the field were organizing politically. So I looked to folks like Karen Hollis and Ira Shor because I found an affinity with them because of their work in the Progressive Caucus and their dual focus on working-class pedagogy and politics.

So, in a sense, the way in which I encountered scholars in composition and rhetoric was through their activism and then I read their scholarship in light of that larger activist paradigm, connected it to things that I was interested in, and began to invoke them in my writing as a way to try to bring in some of the issues I thought were important. I should add that I was also writing at a time when a lot of the scholarship was student-paper driven, mainly around cognitive studies, error studies; Linda Flower was still doing social-cognitive rhetoric. I wasn't aware of a lot of people writing about politics or agency or students as political beings, so I felt there was no one for me to draw upon, except Ira Shor maybe, who was doing that writing, so I felt had to go other places.

**Related to that, I wanted to ask if there any other figures in the field that you think have a lot to offer in the area of public or civic rhetoric? Anyone that you didn't already mention?**

The field tends to create hero narratives: "Then there was Dave Bartholomae. Then there was Linda Flower." I get that, and I admire their work. Still, I would say that the people who were doing civically minded and politically oriented activism that interested me were people who the field has somewhat forgotten about: Louis Crew, who was one of the first "out" gay scholars and certainly one of the first folks to bring those issues into the field. I don't think his work is ever really cited, but I think he was a pivotal figure. He edited the first *College English* around sexuality. Carlotta Dwyer, who helped form the Latino Caucus, did a lot of work in developing the idea of a Latino writer in our field. She used to go around and listen to street poets and

handwrite their poetry in order to begin to record it. I'm not sure she is adequately represented in the history of our field. Richard Ohmann is in some ways a huge figure, but in some ways is no longer cited, which has to do with us thinking that "class" is a dead category—an opinion I clearly don't think is true.

I think people who had an idea that crossed disciplines, crossed boundaries, and imagined that intervening in the field took building a new collective identity and a new collective sense of who our students were and what our responsibilities were to them were pivotal to the field's development. Here I'm thinking about many of the members of CCCCs' caucuses and special interest groups, but that probably also didn't publish that much. Maybe they published textbooks, but they didn't publish the CCCCs' article; they didn't do the university press book. They probably taught four/four. Worked for justice in their immediate contexts. And as our field moved in the '80s to thinking of itself as a traditional discipline, their work didn't have the public context to be cited. So they fell off the map. But for people who, prior to when you had doctorates and MAs in rhet/comp, were busy inventing what it meant to teach writing in the '70s and early '80s, they know who these people are. It's a shame that the whole field doesn't.

**I hadn't thought about that. I have read a lot of alternative histories of the field in Louise Phelps's class in my PhD program at ODU. But obviously where they publish is going to be a huge factor in how they are remembered.**

A lot of alternative histories tend to focus on alternative sites of teaching. They don't go back and try to reclaim figures who were at that borderline when we were political and pre-disciplinary. The work that those folks did, that scene has been lost. And in the process we have forgotten that there were alternative ways to imagine our professional identity.

**One of the figures we read, Jim Zebroski, was somebody who brought up lots of issues related to class. His work stood out to me as being really interesting and focused on different elements that a lot of the other histories leave out. And then there was work by Keith Gilyard and Jacqueline Jones Royster and others who were pulling out figures from the past who have been overlooked for one reason or another.**

I remember when I was in grad school, when I took my only comp/rhet course with Bartholomae. He said, "You know, none of the people we are reading in class have Composition and Rhetoric degrees." They had literature degrees, psychology degrees, linguistics degrees. His point was that this notion of a specific degree was a recent historical phenomenon, and a lot of the people who drew upon multiple disciplinary interests are less interesting to the field now as the field decides that it's producing its own knowledge and doesn't have to draw off other disciplines as much.

So “writing about writing” is in effect arguing that comp/rhet doesn’t need to pull off of other disciplines because we now know what writing is. It is like a culminating consolidation moment that has been happening since the ‘80s. And I think it is that consolidation into a field that has left behind many important figures, left behind a whole different way of acting as a professional.

Service learning was seen as “civic,” and that turned into “community partnership,” which was “civic” plus a little agitation. But if you go back and look at Geneva Smitherman, she was doing hardcore organizing. These folks were thinking of the discipline and conferences as a place to learn organizing tactics to take back to where they taught because they recognized that for the student to be in the classroom the whole system has to change. And that’s been lost, I think. Maybe it’s coming back a bit though. Linda Adler-Kassner’s *The Activist WPA* draws off Marshall Ganz who does community organizing based on his work with SNCC and Caesar Chavez, and so she is reanimating it in a way. She is not invoking the New University Conference, or Progressive Caucus, or the Black Caucus, but she is drawing on that history to say we have to do more if we want diverse students from all backgrounds in our classrooms.

**When you describe what you do within composition and rhetoric, what terms do you prefer? “Activist rhetoric,” “public rhetoric,” “civic rhetoric,” etc.? Which terms do you end up using about your own work, and why?**

That’s tricky. One of the people I studied with in graduate school at the University of Pittsburgh was Gayatri Spivak, probably the most significant teacher I ever had in my life. I can remember chatting with her once. She was saying that she was going to give a talk at a conference in India based on subaltern rhetorics and was going to wear a professional business suit because “wherever I am, I like to surprise and change the context a bit.” Everybody was expecting “X,” so she decided she would format her identity slightly differently. And I remember thinking that the lesson there was that whatever label you take on, you have to be very tactical about it.

So I probably have used all of those terms at different points, but it has always been context-specific. If I am arguing to the Dean that I want funding to take working-class students to London to do writing with working-class writers as part of an attempt to write a working-class manifesto, then I will call it “service learning.” If I am working on Linda Flower’s work, which I admire, but I am trying to make the point that the field has settled for a weak sense of agency, I might position myself as doing “community partnership” work and try to push community partnership work beyond where it currently is because Linda Flower uses “community literacy” as her term.

So I am less concerned about the term that I am identified with than how I can use the term to push the debate in a certain way, which kind of goes back to the fact that I had this introduction to the field that wasn’t based upon reading a lot of composition/

rhetoric scholarship. I came into the field with a set of allegiances and thoughts about what the field stood for politically. I am interested in what term you can deploy at that moment that is going to push that politics along. I have been a “partnership” person. I have been a “community literacy” person, I have been a “civic engagement” person. I have done “service learning.” But, at heart, I am always trying to be a progressive scholar, a socially committed person. So it is always a question, to me, of what term at what moment will push that agenda along.

**That makes sense. It is very rhetorical of you.**

That’s what Spivak was teaching me. You need to be rhetorical about your identity. Don’t essentialize it. Think of how you are trying to intervene in everything you do.

**In “Writing Beyond the Curriculum” and in your book, *Gravyland*, you discuss how to foster engagement with the community outside of the classroom. Do you think interested individual composition instructors should pursue community partnerships, such as service learning projects? Or do you think institutional support or being part of a wider network or “interdisciplinary counter institutional space” or “counterspace,” as you discuss, are necessities for such work?**

There is a big grandiose answer to that. I would say for faculty who are not in the tenure stream, who are adjuncting at a pitiful pay rate and little security, I think service learning isn’t the best use of their time. I think their extra hours should be devoted to working to unionize or to support their union to solidify their economic position. I think for graduate students it is important from the moment they begin their career to think about how they are going to relate to the neighborhoods that surround the university they’ll eventually work in. But you have to have a real theory of community change and agency, and you really have to know the community you are going into. So I have tended to tell graduate students it should be a pivotal part of your education, and you should construct classes—and I have had some fantastic students who have done amazing things—but you really should wait a year or two and really learn the community before undertaking such work in your graduate career.

And I think the role of individual faculty is to become deeply enmeshed in the community in which you live and listen patiently for a while and eventually see which community invites you in to be part of their collective struggle, and then to think through how the limited skills of the academy can relate to larger systemic issues. I think individual faculty can model an ethical practice, and part of that ethical practice is drawing the resources out of the university and into those community collective struggles. Then, as you model that, it is important for faculty to join together.

At Temple University, I had an institute, created with my close colleague Eli Goldblatt. My goal with the institute was to try to move from that individual tactical intervention and to create a strategic space in the university to support community activism. My sense was that the one thing universities can do well is generate money and spend it. And the one thing that resource-poor communities have a hard time doing—and this very true of non-profits—is generating money and having the ability to spend it. Strategically, if you can get faculty to develop enough ethical partnerships to create an institute, you can then use that location to help fund the collective struggles of the communities around you. And I think in doing so, you can create a node within an otherwise neo-liberal corporate university that can affect a different practice. If you can do that well, you can model to graduate students and undergraduate students what it means to take your knowledge and put it into the service of something greater than a journal or a grade. So it is within that framework that I would think about how service learning or activism operates.

Regarding the idea of the “counterspace,” it is possible to create alliances with your colleagues and community members to have a discursive and material space where different types of work can be done. One of the legacies that I admire about organizations like the Black Caucus is that it has created a space that has been sustained for decades, that has generated partnership work, scholarship work. The caucus has mentored students into the field in a way that pushes against the field’s limitations. When our principle models are the celebrity scholars, we forget about these different collective traditions. So the counter-institutional space was a way of saying there is a way to act collectively that you’ll find much more sustaining in the long term. Dave Bartholomae said this hilarious thing once that someone reported to me. He said, “You know, I’m really famous until I step outside the conference.” I think what he was saying was we mistake disciplinary status for actual importance. The counterspace was a way to think through what it would mean to be important.

**Outside of your role as a scholar and teacher, do you participate in any activist work that is completely separate from your other scholarship and teaching in the field? And if so, do you see that work as relating to your scholarship and teaching indirectly?**

That is sort of a “yes/no” answer. When I was in grad school and I had two kids and no money, very limited health insurance, and no childcare, I was very active in organizing for student benefits. When I was at Temple, there was a whole set of immigrant rights and housing rights, etc. to work on. Since I have been at Syracuse, I have been active in the anti-gentrification struggle in the near West Side, though not nearly involved as my graduate student Ben Kuebrich, who has done great work there.

At all of these moments, though, I have always also been located in the university. Since I was a young adult, I have either taught at the university as a grad student or

worked there full-time. And I have always thought it seemed somewhat odd that if I am in such a filthy rich institution, which a lot of colleges are compared to the neighborhood that surrounds them, that I wouldn’t try to get those dollars out into the projects that I am working for. So I have consciously never drawn a distinct line between the two because if you are in the near West Side and this community group has nobody who can go door-to-door and find out what the community thinks about police cameras coming in, for instance, and I have a class where students are learning the rhetoric of activism, it seems wrong for me to hold them apart. It limits the students’ education and keeps resources that could benefit the community. So, no, I don’t have anything I have done in a community that I don’t consciously try to integrate into everything else that I do. I don’t understand why people do that, but that might also be a personality thing. That might really be my inability to hold things separate, so I would not hold myself up as a model.

**It makes sense when one’s career takes up so much time and effort, that if you can integrate your activism into that rather than add it on totally separately, it might work out more efficiently.**

I can remember when my wife and I were in grad school and we were starting our careers, all the professors at conferences were always saying, “I am so busy. I am so busy. I am way behind on this article.” We can remember thinking at that time, all you’re really doing is writing an article. You’re not digging a ditch, you’re not serving burgers, you are not being told to work 70 hours a week like my parents and friends. Of course, I’m older now and can understand the tension a bit better—articles help you get tenure, which help you with economic security; some articles can intervene and change the field. Most folks aren’t just writing articles, they are running programs, caring for families. Still, just thinking about my own situation, I think if my very limited work schedule does not allow me to go to a community meeting then I must be lousy at time management. As a full-time Research I tenured professor, I usually teach six hours a week. Given that luxury, it seems disingenuous to say I can’t manage my time to do something more than teach.

I also don’t expect any sympathy for being behind on an article because I have so much of my own time that I can control. I think I should be able to do more than that. I just should. It seems to me that our discipline has so heightened this scholarly profile that we have decided that’s enough and we manage our time badly. For me, I think this rhetoric about being too busy is sometimes an alibi for my lack of time management skills more than anything else. If you are in grad school with kids, then you are screwed and are just trying to survive. I have a student now who has to work at a restaurant full-time because his stipend doesn’t pay him enough to support his family, so I get that. But the filthy rich paid professor teaching 1-1 like myself? No. No excuses.

**It helps to keep in perspective what a lot of other people, especially working-class people in the community, have to do to get by.**

My dad fixed radars on tugboats sixty hours a week, and I made more summer teaching than he made all year. So what, am I going to complain about that? How ridiculous would that be?

**In “Sinners Welcome” and some of your other scholarship, you stress the importance of agency—as you were saying, to go beyond “rhetorical agency.” Could you go more into how you view agency and how some parts of the field may have a limited idea about agency?**

The thing about “Sinners Welcome” is I am afraid it comes off a little too harshly on Linda Flower. She’s fantastic. She has done amazing things. I was using the fact that everybody loves Linda Flower’s work to question why we would accept a model where we teach people to talk politely to political leaders as our only view of agency, when we know talking politely to political leaders—unless you have a thousand people behind you—isn’t going to produce anything. I was interested in that broad-based acceptance, so that’s why I wrote that article. That idea of agency, of polite talk and civic discourse, is a nice way to make what we do seemingly culturally important. And it’s a way to claim that arguments can change power because we are good at teaching argument. But most people who have changed power that I have read, like Martin Luther King or Caesar Chavez, have always linked their arguments up to broad-scale systemic mass movements. This is what Nancy Welsh’s work is about: Yes, we do need to teach people to be rhetorically savvy, but part of that education should also be about getting a bunch of people to be part of your movement.

I think that as we have become a discipline and we have increasingly worried about our status—“are we respected as much as English?”—we have taken on an argument that is appealing to the university but ineffective for our students. That’s what I was trying to say. The definition of agency that created our field and put working-class students in our classrooms is not the agency that we are teaching our students to use now, and it is not the agency we are invoking in our scholarship. And in that way, we are leaving behind all of the people we claim to care about in our scholarship. So I thought that wasn’t right; that’s just ethically wrong.

I studied postmodernism where you are supposed to think nothing is “right” and nothing is “wrong” in an essentialist sense, and, yeah, I believe that. But I also have read Amartya Sen where he says there are fundamental human rights. One of them should be that everyone has access to an education that will empower them to create the society in which they want to live. And we have left that definition behind in our work. We have said it is enough to teach people how to be persuasive in front of people with power who could care less about what most working poor people have to

say. And I just refuse to think that that’s where our discipline is headed and that it’s going to accept that definition.

I think this generation of grad students who are carrying more debt than any previous generation, who have voted for or against the first African American president, who have experienced the recession, who have seen two wars, I can’t believe that this generation will be satisfied with the definition of agency which is strictly limited to the politics of manners. They have just experienced too much systemic violence to think that is an adequate solution to the moment. So when I think about my grad students or the grad students I talk to at conferences, I think the next generation is going to fulfill a lot of the promises that folks like myself and Adler-Kassner and Victor Villanueva and others have been hoping for. I think we are about to flip back to a more engaged period in the field.

**The description of the failure of the Glassville project in “Strategic Speculations on the Question of Value” reminded me of some of Paula Mathieu’s discussion of failed service learning projects from her book, *Tactics of Hope*, which I read when I was studying under Diana George at Virginia Tech.**

She’s the best. I love Diana George. I think Diana George is a great model of an academic activist. My goal is to be Diana George.

**Diana is great. She has definitely also inspired me a lot too. So you have also argued in some of your work that tactics aren’t enough and we should focus more on collective action that can lead to real social change. For example, in “Emergent Strategies,” you say, “to invoke the language of de Certeau, it became clear that the TAWFF project had become a tactic (a small intervention working off what the system will allow), but not a strategy (the establishment on a solid space from which to enact systemic change).” Could you say a little about how you view the relationship between tactics and a larger strategy for collective action? Depending on the political or institutional location, what if there is not yet a “solid space” in which to establish a larger strategy? Is it ever appropriate to concentrate on short-term tactics in the absence of an effective long-term strategy—or must a well-developed long-term strategy always come first? What if the long-term strategy or even the end goal is undecided or in dispute?**

Okay, there’s a lot there. There are a couple of responses. On the one hand, of course, in certain contexts, in the immediate moment, the best you can do is to try to throw a wrench into the assembly line. This moment when at the very least I am going to stop this thing from happening.

**It reminds me of the Mario Savio quote from the Berkeley Free Speech Movement.**

To throw yourself into the machine. So, of course, sometimes the tactic is “the system is screwed, but I will not let this student fall victim to it.” It’s completely ethical. You have to act in whatever ways it is possible for you to act. But I think within those individualized tactical moments, there is also an underlying ethical set of commitments and an implicit sense of strategy of what it would mean to change the system. So it wouldn’t just be a tactic. It could also simultaneously be about creating a policy; it could be about a structure. Any individual moment works within a larger paradigm. And the reason that things stay at the tactical level so much with faculty in the academy is that we don’t do a lot of training in graduate education on how you build community, how you build a movement, how you understand that you share common values and then chart out a course that will enact those values. So consequently, I think grad students are taught to think just at the level of tactics. But if you were to make part of graduate education about this sense of how one would move from step one to step two to step three, I think you would find on a value level that a lot of faculty would share common agreement and could, in fact, plan for strategic spaces.

I do tactical stuff all the time; it’s not like I am always grandiose-big-strategy-space guy. I have been fortunate enough to work with organizers who have taught me how to move from tactic to strategy, and I have seen the power of when your tactical moment becomes a policy for those to whom you are most indebted and want to help and work with—that I always think you should point towards that.

And I hope that Mathieu would agree with this. I think Mathieu herself would say that she has been cartooned into thinking just tactics when she has a more nuanced view. But for faculty to say tactics are enough is to say, “Well, my privilege is set. I’m okay, so my marginal tactical thing for you will stand for my political commitment.” I think the people we work with deserve better than that. Spivak used to say all the time, you have to learn “your privilege is your loss,” meaning you have to realize you live in this bubble, and you don’t necessarily understand how the world operates, and so what you think is important is minor or trivial to most people. Tactics are important in the bubble of limited activism in the academy. But the working poor and the oppressed and those who live on the wrong side of privilege, they need strategic change. So I think you have to leave your privilege bubble and think hard about what it would mean to be part of that generalized strategy.

**I just have one last question. You have discussed scholarship, teaching, and activism as entwined, and you suggest that as scholars and teachers we have an obligation to actively work to be part of the solution to social problems that our field often discusses. Do you see any limitations to scholarship in action—both**

**in terms of constraints on it from structures, conditions, and realities about how institutions and communities work and in terms of your own sense of what our position can’t explain or address?**

Scholarship in action was the term that my chancellor used at Syracuse University. In that context, it began as an effort to help faculty take on social justice campaigns, which she put a lot of money towards, but through the years it turned into more neo-liberal gentrification projects. I think that is because the institution is stronger than any particular individual’s willpower. What I would say about this is that the real limitation on activism in our field is the beggaring and poverty that the field has placed upon the majority of our teachers. Realistically, if you are teaching four/four/four, and you are a part-time teacher, which is at least 70% of our field, the chances of your classroom being an activist site are small. The labor conditions just beat you down. That isn’t to say that there aren’t teachers in this situation that haven’t done incredible things, but I think systemically, it is very hard to do. In that way, maybe some of the best activism our field could take right now is around labor rights. Change the status of our teachers and you change their ability to take on some of the promises we have made to the larger culture. I think the biggest limitation on our field living up to our promises is the economic condition of our field.

The second limitation is the way in which assessment is operating—in public schools and in state legislatures—it is changing how students are being taught to write in high school and the writing they are expected to produce in college. But all those structures impinge upon our ability to move our classrooms into civic culture in a way that a lot of folks would like.

The other thing is—to be brutally honest about my own status—I think the field and Research I scholars who publish and people in privileged positions have the great fortune to claim that our field should be activist. But I think the majority of the field looks at their working-class students and thinks the most activist thing they could do is to get them to pass Writing 101. I think that is deeply honorable work, and I think that’s a progressive thing to do, but that’s the activism of our field. When I taught at Temple, I was always proudest of the fact that my first-generation students passed my class and went on to be successful. I don’t know. That is the activism going on that we don’t talk about as much anymore. I think sometimes Research I scholars who are in such privileged positions can claim a larger vision and miss the deep work that other people are doing.

I am deeply, deeply aware of my own limitations and lack of success in activism. That’s why I write about things that don’t work because I have an idea that I have been trying to figure out, and I have never quite gotten there. I often just feel really humble when I talk to really great activists. I think, “I wish I could do more than write an article.” That’s how I feel about activism. There are so many people out there to

admire, and I think maybe one day I will be like them. There's so many people I could name, people I meet on the street. I admire Mark Lyons, who does immigrant work in Philly, stands in front of the police as they try to arrest people and take them to the detention center. If I could be like Mark Lyons one day, then, I would say, "There." Then I would have done something, and I would feel proud of myself.

**I think you are being humble. You have done a lot. There is a quote from Paula Mathieu in *Tactics of Hope* about the "radical insufficiency" of all of our acts. I feel like she was talking about how not to get burned out as an activist and how not to feel hopeless because there are so many problems and they are so big, and it is so hard to change them. I think she had a really good discussion about how not to lose hope, which I guess was part of the point of the book.**

I mean this as a compliment, but you could almost turn her book into a quote-a-day calendar, a Mathieu inspiration moment every day. She is a brilliant writer.

**Is there anything else you wanted to add about anything?**

I began by saying that I didn't enter the field through composition and rhetoric scholarship, and it was very difficult for me to find people that I drew upon for the work that I do. But really, knowing the graduate students I work with now, I have immense hope in this next generation of comp/rhet scholars. They have a much larger proactive vision of what we can be— particularly when I think of the dissertations and the projects and the way they approach the field. It is the greatest thing when you see what is coming. I entered the field through something else and found a way, but I am really excited about what the next generation of folks are about to produce.

## Author Bio

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## Book & New Media Reviews

**Saul Hernandez, Intern**

Georgia College and State University

**Ryan Cresawn, Intern**

University of Arizona

*From the Book & New Media Review Editor's Desk*

**Jessica Shumake, University of Arizona**

In a recent literacy collaboration with Sunnyside High School students and teachers in Tucson, Arizona, I had the privilege to read and offer feedback on students' scholarship applications and personal statements for college. One student brought her academic transcript to our session because she was hoping she could explain to critical readers the reason for a low grade in one of her classes. I asked her to tell me a little about the class in which she received the low grade so that we could integrate her experience into her personal statement. The story the student shared stopped me cold.

"We got a new teacher that year," she stammered. "The teacher was from Iowa and was much harder than our previous teacher who went on maternity leave." The student continued to explain that most honors classes at her high school were taught very much like the regular sections of any given class. However, the new teacher from Iowa was adamant that honors students needed to have additional challenges, assignments, and homework. The student admitted sheepishly that she "just couldn't meet the teacher's standards and expectations" and barely squeaked by with a D in the course. The student also shared that the teacher left the position after one year, but before resigning told the class that her decision to leave was based on her observation that the students in her classes were not academically prepared to be successful in college and that she would never allow her own child to attend a school in the district. The inappropriate forthrightness on the part of the teacher from Iowa cast a shadow over the student's perception of herself and her readiness for college. A 750-word personal statement is a net whose mesh allows many hardships to slip through in the interest of concision. Fortunately, this issue's keyword essay and review writers are less constrained in their ability to reflect upon educational access and efforts to write one's way out of constrained mindsets and situations.

The overriding theme in Maria Conti's review of David Coogan's *Writing Our Way Out* is the importance of listening to the voices of incarcerated writers as their citizen-selves are produced when they critique "the severely flawed systems

that govern their daily lives.” Anthony Boynton’s review likewise takes a stand for historically marginalized communities to examine how Linda Spears-Bunton and Rebecca Powell’s *Toward a Literacy of Promise: Joining the African American Struggle* invites scholars and teachers of the rhetoric of social change to embrace critical literacy as a “humanizing force and a vehicle for political participation and citizenry.” Finally, this issue’s keyword essay “Place-Based Literacies” by Rosanne Carlo explores recent scholarship in urban and rural literacy studies to highlight how community literacy researchers and practitioners are actively shaping and transforming the social and ecological realities of their neighborhoods and institutions through non-dominant “world-making and world-revealing practices.”

## Keyword Essay: Place-Based Literacies

**Rosanne Carlo**

College of Staten Island (CUNY)

Practicing community outreach and research—alongside writing community scholarship—requires an attention to place in the present, as a literal site of practice with material conditions. It also requires an attention to place in the past and future, as an imaginary as well as historical engagement of what a place once was for people and what it has yet to become. Literacy work is, as Paulo Freire describes, a “constant unveiling of reality” (8) toward the end of creating “revolutionary futurity” (10). Explained in more concrete terms, when “people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world and *with which* and *in which* they find themselves” then they can begin to transform their reality, both ecologically and socially (Freire 9). Community work and scholarship continually unveils reality to change and shape it, and this process is a form of place-making.

It is hard to separate the words of education and community scholars from the locations through and in which they write; location is not a backdrop for abstract theories of literacy, but it is the source of those investigations. For example, rural Nebraska and its prairie shapes Robert Brooke’s reflections on place-conscious education as a way to create responsive citizens (*Rural Voices: Place-Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing*); Harlem’s crowded streets after a show at the Apollo are the rhythms behind Valerie Kinloch’s arguments for a critical stance toward gentrification and loss of black culture (*Harlem on Our Minds: Place, Race, and the Literacies of Urban Youth*); and the urban community college campus with an open admissions policy—its students formerly academic outsiders, now moving from their worlds of work, to home, to school—underlie Ira Shor’s calls for a critical pedagogy that works to transform social inequalities (*Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*). It is not hard to think of several other place-based writings and educational theories in composition and community literacy scholarship.

This discussion of community literacy work and place reminds us of how Anne Ruggles Gere drew attention to the “extracurricular”—or places beyond the university—where we find literacy at work. In her article, now over twenty years old, she writes, “They [writers] may gather in rented rooms in the Tenderloin, around kitchen tables in Lansing, Iowa, or in a myriad of other places to write their worlds. The question remains whether we will use classroom walls as instruments of separation or communication” (91). The answer, if I can be so bold as to claim one, is now here—the “extracurricular” is becoming the curricular as more educators are advocating for place-based literacies under names like service-learning, place-conscious education, ecomposition and ecopedagogy, and urban and rural literacy studies. These subfields, of course, are not one in the same as they draw on