

# Distributed Definition Building and the Coalition for Community Writing

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**Abstract:** The author offers distributed definition building as a method that community-engaged teachers and scholars as well as coalition leaders can use for justice-focused coalitional work. She looks at moments that demonstrate the Coalition for Community Writing's commitment to representation, recognition and celebration, program building, and mentorship as examples of and a means toward what this distributed definitional method can offer in building a coalition. The author takes the term "community writing" and asks the Coalition for Community Writing (CCW) board members and a CCW Emerging Scholar to share their definition of coalitional work in community writing. The multiple and sometimes conflicting or divergent perspectives on meaning showcase the messiness and affordances of coalitional work.

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What does it mean to work in and help build coalition within our own communities and with communities of which we are not a member? How do we define those communities? In this reflective article, I offer a method for justice-focused coalitional work that I call *distributed definition building*. I use the term "community writing" to model how distributed definition building rejects narrow, top-down, definitive definitions of critical or contested terms that could stifle community member voices, making clear that there is no one definition for "community writing"; in fact, the capaciousness of the term is its strength. Rather than trying to control the definition of community writing, there is strength in re-distributing the ability to define the term out to the people doing the community writing work themselves.

The Coalition for Community Writing (CCW), which I founded as a 501c3 in 2019 with a national group of scholars, teachers, organizers, and activists, is one of Rhetoric and Writing Studies' disciplinary organizations that is also interdisciplinary and inter-community in its aspirations toward coalitional and transformational work. As the Coalition's Executive Director and Conference on Community Writing's Founding Director, I share a brief history of why and how the Conference and then the Coalition began, in part, I would argue, because of definitional confusion over "community writing." I then offer two examples of distributed definition building around what "community writing" means, bringing in fifteen of CCW's board members' and one of the CCW Emerging Scholars' reflections on why coalitional, relational work is so vital in ethical community-based, justice-focused work. Finally, I conclude by demonstrating how the distributed definitions may help members to identify an action plan concerning the strengths and gaps within the Coalition.

The method of distributed definition building helps build equity, accessibility, and accountability into the iterative process of building a coalition toward substantive change. Part of my role as a coalitional leader is to make spaces for a multiplicity of definitions for "community writing" to emerge from faculty, students, and community members and partners. Distributed definition building can be useful to coalition builders and leaders working with complex or contested terms. The distributed approach to definition building is a method that can move a coalition toward justice in the intentional rejection of narrow and hierarchical rules for who can participate and what "counts" as important. It can help to guide mission and vision, and it can help hold members of a coalition accountable to the sometimes shared, sometimes different values of those involved.

## **A Brief History of the Conference on Community Writing and Coalition for Community Writing: The Need for Change**

At the time that I first pitched the idea for a conference to colleagues in the writing program at University of Colorado Boulder, where I was a faculty member until 2021, I'd founded and had been directing the Writing Initiative for Service and Engagement for six years, helping to coordinate the writing program's transformation into one of the first writing programs in the country to integrate community-engaged pedagogies throughout its lower- and upper-division courses. In work I'd done running faculty workshops at the university and as an Advisory Board member of Campus Compact of the Mountain West facilitating Engaged Faculty Institutes, participants consistently named several impediments to successfully doing community-engaged work.

Graduate students and junior faculty would often say that they'd been told not to do community-based work until they had secured a job or, even more troubling, until post tenure. Sometimes that advice came from a well-meaning place—a mentor or chair who wanted to protect the person's time. Sometimes it reflected an institutional misconception that community-engaged

work is service rather than intellectual and rigorous scholarship. My own writing program director at the time called community-engaged scholarship “academic light.” All too often, institutional mission statements that affirm commitment to community do not align with realities of support or with institutional policies around review, tenure, promotion, and hiring priorities for community-en graduate students and faculty. <sup>1</sup>Relationship-focused partnerships that center trust building, collaboration, and knowledge sharing are the foundation of community-engaged work (e.g. Arellano et. al.; Blackburn and Cushman; Goldblatt; Powell; Rousculp; Shah). It does not make sense, then, that collaboratively-written work, often with students or community partners, is sometimes counted in promotion and tenure cases as less significant than single-authored work, or that public-facing scholarship cannot be counted as scholarship, which reinforces academic ideologies of individualism and isolationism.

The frequent dismissal of community-engaged work’s significance or place in the academy outside of “service” has led to feelings of frustration and exhaustion. As colleagues around the country shared their stories at the Engaged Faculty Institutes, it became increasingly clear that these issues of misunderstanding and lack of support are in fact related to a problem of definition. People in positions of power were often defining “community-engaged writing” or “community writing” as service or as less-than-rigorous scholarship and therefore would impact and limit what was possible for faculty and students at those institutions and in the field of writing and rhetoric. I believed—when first conceiving of the Conference on Community Writing—that a critical mass of community writing scholars and teachers could create a disciplinary shift on a national level toward support for community writing work that would make it more viable and sustainable for individuals.

Drawing on the Campus Compact model for Engaged Faculty and Engaged Departments, I asked conference participants during the Chair’s Address at the inaugural CCW, “What if we think of ourselves as the first ‘Engaged Discipline?’” What are the possibilities:

- for how writing programs are structured?
- for institutional support for justice-focused, community-based research and pedagogical projects?
- in terms of how we consider where knowledge is housed and produced?
- for how graduate students are trained?
- for faculty searches and priorities for hiring?

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<sup>1</sup> The Coalition for Community Writing produced a Resource Guide that includes “How to Make the Case for Your Community-Engaged Work” and “How to Modify Campus Governance Documents to Address Community-Engaged Work.”

- for review, tenure, and promotion cases?
- for our academic journals and book series?

How do we (here meaning community writing scholars and practitioners in rhetoric and writing studies) re-shape the field of rhetoric and writing to include community writing as an integral part of an established and shared definition of the discipline? A disciplinary shift would require re-defining community writing so that it is legible, understandable, and, therefore, supported.

At the first Conference on Community Writing, more than 350 speakers shared their community writing work—work that varied significantly from project to project and place to place. A few speakers even asked whether their work was “community writing,” as those of us gathered together in Boulder tried to understand what it was that was coalescing. From this beginning event, and as CCW has since rooted itself as an important disciplinary conference, it is clear that it is not a matter of creating a single, uniform definition of community writing, but rather creating space to generate, share, and support multiple, meaningful definitions.

After the second CCW in 2017, again hosted in Boulder, CO, several colleagues from universities, colleges, and community organizations and I collaboratively wrote bylaws and a mission and vision statement for a Coalition for Community Writing that would be an international network of faculty, students, community partners, artists, writers, activists, and organizers who share knowledges and projects across communities—using writing, broadly defined, as a force for social change. In 2019, the Coalition for Community Writing became an official 501c3. Distributed definition building is a collaborative way by which the organization continuously adapts in an iterative, generative, and capacious process to align with members’ values and needs and hold itself accountable.

## Distributed Definition Building and Community Writing

While the term “community writing” was used in scholarship and practice before my colleagues and I launched the Conference on Community Writing<sup>2</sup> in 2015, the term is now more commonly used in scholarship, course titles, and job ads. But it may not always be clear what is meant by the term. In the last twenty-five years, the scholarship and practice of community writing have developed significantly with key concepts such as: “writing beyond the curriculum” (Parks and Goldblatt); writing about, with, and for communities (Deans); literacy, archival research, and historical work (e.g. Epps-Robertson; Royster; Pauszek); community publishing and writing by and as the community (e.g. Hubrig; Mathieu, et al.; Monberg; Moss, *A Community Text*); ethnographic research (e.g. Cushman; Jackson and Whitehorse DeLaune; Roossien and Riley Mukavetz); com-

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<sup>2</sup> I want to thank Seth Myers, Alexander Fobes, Catherine Kunce, Christine Macdonald, and Gary Hink for their tremendous work in helping to imagine and host the Conference on Community Writing in 2015 and 2017.

munity engagement in writing program administration (e.g. House; Rose and Weiser); community literacies (e.g. Feigenbaum, Collaborative; Flower; Grabill; Pritchard; Richardson); public rhetorics (e.g. Hsu; Long; Ryder); the public turn (Farmer; Mathieu); Writing Democracy (Carter et al.); decolonial and antiracist pedagogy and research involving literacies inside and outside of academic spaces (e.g. Alvarez; Baker-Bell; Cushman; Jackson and Whitehorse DeLaune; King et al.; Kynard, “All I Need”; Kynard, “Teaching While Black”; Maraj; Martinez, Counterstory; Ore et al.). The term can also refer to community-based writing such as slam poetry, public performance, museum exhibits, graffiti and mural art, zines, protest signs, and much more. I understand community writing as an umbrella term that embraces and continually evolves with these diverse areas.

It is not that “community writing” is so broad a concept that it means everything and nothing at once. Rather, often the naming of sub-fields and fields of study can be designed either to develop an us/them binary that is exclusionary or to claim intellectual territory. While the claiming of ideas is not inherently exclusionary, intention is important. Academics are notoriously trained toward individualism—publishing single-authored works, striving for acclaim and tenure, claiming ideas, and often ignoring or discounting ideas, knowledge, and expertise housed in non-academic spaces. These actions can make for a toxic culture of competition and scarcity. A benefit of distributing the definition of “community writing” out away from a single founder or person in a position of power is to counter exclusionary and individualistic tendencies. Community writing work, at its best, is a means toward dismantling, transforming, and repairing, coupling the work with clear actions and accountability.

How does accountability show up through distributed definition building? As Rachel C. Jackson explains, “settling” of meaning is a colonial academic practice that does not leave room for alternate ways of knowing and non-Western methodologies (Jackson and Whitehorse DeLaune 40). To deliberately not settle the meaning of “community writing” and with the aspiration of justice-focused coalition building, CCW can use distributed definition building to bring together a diversity of individuals, projects, and organizations. Part of the Conference’s and Coalition’s work is to provide people a platform to share their projects and connect, regardless of age, physical or mental ability, race or ethnicity, cultural or economic background, as we work toward structural programmatic, institutional, disciplinary, (inter)disciplinary, and community-based change. Scholars, students, teachers, activists, organizers, artists, playwrights, policy writers, poets, and so many more, in sharing their unique and various projects at CCW events, participate in distributed definition building and in a process for justice-focused coalition building as they also generate that coalition in real time.

What are community-engaged writing and rhetoric scholars and teachers positioned to do, as we straddle our academic and non-academic communities? Part of building definitions that can shift academic and non-academic systems is to stress that we in academia are always also community members. It is why Terese Guinsatao Monberg wrote about “writing as community.” Elaine

Richardson's work on Black girls' and Black women's literacies, Beverly Moss's ethnographic research on churches and church sermons (*A Community Text; "A Literacy Event"*) and Ada Hubrig's work on disability justice offer three examples of scholars embedded in their communities doing research with and as members of those communities themselves. At the Conference on Community Writing, we strive to welcome in non-academically affiliated community leaders and members to share knowledge and expertise. CCW members help to build a justice-focused coalition as they call out gaps in CCW's representation, programming, and accessibility. In so doing, they are helping to continually expand and shape the definition anew.

## Representation in Definition Building

Representation is an essential part of distributed definition building as it is also part of the work of building a justice-focused coalition. This means not only, for example, collaborating with those present at events or those publishing in CCW's affiliated journals, *Community Literacy Journal* and *Reflections*, but also continually looking at the gaps. Who is attending events, and who is not; which concepts and voices are foregrounded, and which are not; who is being published and cited in the journals, and who is not; who has access to our programming, and who does not? Those of us in leadership roles in the organization learn from taking a hard look at this information and pledge continually to do better through dedicated actions. Through the recursive work on representation, we are working to expand and incorporate definitions for what community writing is and is not, the values that matter, and the people and projects involved. Distributed definition building allows community members, whether scholars, students, activists, artists, organizers, writers, or the many, many people involved in the Coalition, to write their own definitions of community writing based on their unique projects, aspirations, ethics, and positionalities that are then represented at the conference and in our affiliated journals, in our classrooms and on our syllabi, in our community-engaged activism, advocacy, and research. The building of coalition happens in the process of distributed definition building.

To celebrate and develop recognition for the exemplary work of our members, the Coalition for Community Writing has several nationally vetted awards including Outstanding Book in Community Writing. The book award offers an example of how distributed definition building has helped the organization internally to understand gaps in representation of certain kinds of projects, and, therefore, expand its focus and scope. In 2019, the book award committee determined that there were three books of the thirteen nominated that were exceptionally worthy of the award. Each book dealt with a different kind of community writing. Rather than choose one, which would seem to privilege one kind of work over another and therefore one definition over another, the committee determined to award all three to show the organization's desire to reject a narrow definition for community writing excellence and to instead celebrate a broader range of projects.

During the next awards cycle in 2021, a book was nominated for the Outstanding Book



Award, but the award committee saw that it did not fit into the criteria for how the organization had been defining community writing scholarship as work that happens outside of college and university campuses. Rather than exclude this exceptional book from the running, CCW created a new award to indicate the organization's desire to expand its existing ideas of where community writing occurs to fit the critical antiracist, activist work happening in academic communities on campuses. In both instances, the awards committees felt that to definitionally limit what community writing is would feed into the individualistic, scarcity mindset prevalent in higher education. They chose to reject that way of thinking about outstanding work and, in the process, to expand CCW's understanding of what community writing can be and how we can support work and people under that expanded definition.

## Collaboration in Distributed Definition Building

The Coalition for Community Writing continually addresses the question of to whom we hold ourselves accountable as we look for the gaps between what is and what we aspire to. It may be easy in top-down and non-coalitional organizational models to ignore legitimate concerns or suggestions from members rather than to continually strive for organizational evolution. Alternately, our commitment to accountability through representation and collaboration involves transparency, adaptability, and radical openness to justice-focused work.

There are several ways in which CCW strives to be collaborative. One example is coalitional collaboration across justice-focused organizations, which is a part of distributed definition building. For example, in 2020, CCW in collaboration with the American Indian Caucus, the Asian/Asian American Caucus, the Black Caucus, the Latinx Caucus, and DBLAC, created the Conference on Community Writing Emerging Scholars Award for BIPOC graduate students and junior faculty. Because community-engaged scholars' work is often delegitimized, those who research and teach community writing can experience isolation, lack of support and mentorship, and threats to security. This reality is heightened for BIPOC students and scholars (Kannan et. al.; Kynard, "Teaching"; Kynard, "All I Need"; Martinez, *Counterstory*). As a guiding principle of CCW, we denounce the long and ongoing legacies of white supremacy culture, settler colonialism, and violence against the intellectual ideas, bodies, and mental wellbeing of BIPOC students, colleagues, community partners, and loved ones.

The Emerging Scholars Award was a small action step we could take in coalition with the caucuses and DBLAC as we considered not only representation and collaboration, but accountability in striving toward a justice-focused coalition. In "Intersectional Feminism & Coalition Building," Carmen Perez explains that to create healing, coalitions should "hold space for the discomfort that is necessary to make amends for harms done... [W]e cannot build strong coalitions unless we're committed to healing our wounds—and our wounds look different." Damián Baca, Romeo García, Lisa King, Andrea Riley Mukavetz, Terese Guinsatao Monberg, Ersula Ore,

Khirsten Scott, Amy Wan, Kimberly Weiser, and I collaboratively wrote the call for applicants and particularly welcomed applications from graduate students, adjuncts, non-tenure track faculty, and faculty without other funding sources, people with disabilities, and LGBTQIA people at community colleges, HBCUs, HSIs, and tribal colleges. We wanted to acknowledge both the different wounds and needs of each individual and the collective wounds, needs, and goals of the cohort.

The Black, Latinx, Asian/Asian American, and American Indian CCCC caucuses and DBLAC each selected a group of four Emerging Scholars. Awardees received Coalition for Community Writing membership for 2021 and 2022 and Conference on Community Writing registration for the October 2021 conference. Awardees were recognized at the conference Awards Ceremony, and Dr. Aja Martinez met with all interested Emerging Scholars to discuss navigating academia and publishing. Additionally, Coalition for Community Writing offered professional development opportunities through online workshops like our annual Job Market Materials Workshop; Review, Tenure, and Promotion Workshop; CCCC Mentoring Workshop; and invitations to present at the conference and publish in *Community Literacy Journal*.

In considering representation and recognition, this cross-coalitional work was a critical part of building the definition of community writing. It indicates that the extraordinary work people are doing in the caucuses is essential to community writing, and people who may not have considered their work “community writing” can find additional support and resources through CCW, while the organization grows and becomes more meaningful through their participation. This reciprocal, relational way of building coalition helps expand our definition towards justice.

## **Distributed Definition Building at Work**

To demonstrate benefits of a kaleidoscopic view of “community writing,” I invited all CCW board members and one of CCW’s Emerging Scholars to contribute to this article by responding to the following email invitation: “share your thoughts on what community writing and coalitional work mean to you in terms of what CCW strives for.” Here, they share their thoughts, arranged alphabetically by their last names.

### **Sweta Baniya**

Community writing and coalition work are important to tackle global challenges that continue to cripple the world. In the current transnational world, we need to teach students to navigate transnational and multicultural spaces via communication, technology, and engagement. Rhetoricians who are engaged in studying the coalition-building work cannot only do this work alone and in silos. If you are “studying” the community, you need to constantly ask yourself how you are contributing to this community. How have you utilized your resources and the privileges that you have in ways that you can support the community, contribute towards community growth, and develop a



long-term partnership?

Community Writing scholars across the country can incubate some ideas of working together as well as have a safe space to discuss community needs together and collaboratively tackle the issues of our communities. The ripple effects of the global pandemic in various vulnerable communities are seen in various sectors of society and it will continue to impact the most vulnerable and the marginalized. Hence, we need to envision working with various local and global communities to build a sustainable future as we cannot do this alone. Hence, we need a coalition of both academics and the community together to mitigate the challenges of the global community.

### **Paul Feigenbaum**

To me, coalitional work is, ideally, an ongoing process of trust-building guided by humility, compassion, and the pursuit of mutual listening and understanding across cultural, institutional, and sometimes ideological lines of difference. It requires adopting a beginner's mindset in relation to the various forms of expertise and knowledge that everyone is bringing to the collaborative process. It also requires making peace with uncertainty and ambiguity.

When coalition partners try to enact these principles and practices together, they can more effectively access and circulate their collective wisdom, and they can more effectively cultivate flexible and creative responses to their dynamic circumstances. None of this is easy, of course, nor is it efficient. This is why I think people need to rededicate themselves regularly to pursuing these principles and practices together, and they must try to be generous with each other when members of the coalition inevitably fall short of these ideals.

### **Megan Hartline**

To me, what makes CCW coalitional rather than just collaborative is the way the organization aims to create space for community writing practitioners whose needs are often unmet. To put it another way, CCW works hard to live out its values. Leaders in the organization know that scholars of color, particularly of marginalized genders, are most likely to take on community work without recognition and have prioritized a diverse set of voices in leadership as well as created space for recognizing and mentoring emerging scholars of color. They know that community partners are not often financially compensated for their heavy work to make projects successful, so the CCW conference brings in local community activists as keynote speakers and pays them for their time and labor. CCW understands that community writing is an ever-changing, often-messy network of relationships and practices that require a coalitional approach to work together toward a more just world.

## **Lisa King**

When I think about coalition, community writing, and CCW's goals, I think about finding ways to break down academic disciplinary/caucus silos that keep us from collaborating, and meeting communities where they are. The work I'm doing with Native Nations partners on a new exhibition that centers Indigenous voices to tell the story of the Indigenous mound on campus requires both of these actions simultaneously. I have to be able to work with collaborators across the campus museum, repatriation office, history, anthropology, landscape design, and campus gardens; but more importantly, the university team I'm working with must foreground the partnerships we are developing with the multiple Native Nations on whose lands we live and work. Whether it's label copy, grant applications, website materials, composing image and design features for the exhibition, or caring for the mound itself, working with our Native co-curators from the ground up is what already makes this project transformative.

## **Seán McCarthy**

I see CCW as a vital and experimental space within the field as we negotiate and build out hybrid spaces not just between universities and communities but also across sectors. This involves not just relationship building but also thinking about our methods of engagement and re-imagining writing and its effect on high-impact learning and change. That work can only happen in community, and I think CCW has a vital role to play in that kind of futuring work.

## **Maria Novotny**

Community writing is not just a practice, but it is also a series of ethical commitments whereby community voices and perspectives are centered over scholarly analysis and theory. In other words, I see the role of CCW as reimagining the role and form of scholarship in order to best represent and serve the purposes of communities who engage in writing. Adopting a more critical-creative form to what it means to produce scholarship — a form that may bend or even resist traditional scholarship — I think helps scholars in community writing engage in more reciprocal and accountable community writing practices.

One example of how scholars may incorporate a critical-creative orientation to community writing is curation, whereby community perspectives and knowledges (whether in writing or some other visual/multi-modal form) is rhetorically assembled into a carefully crafted narrative for publics to engage with, learn from, and encounter. Curation then forces the CCW scholar to be accountable not just to themselves but to the community's the curation represents and to the publics it engages with — pushing the aims and scope of our scholarly potential well beyond university walls.

## **Jessica Restaino**

My goals in community writing work have increasingly been about honoring real human relationships, nurturing them as they are, working from a place that's honest about needs and interests. Sometimes, when these relationships begin outside the university, they eventually show us how universities can help. It's very important to me that, when I do engage the university in some way, it's done as a trustworthy, recognizable, and informed response to what my community partners have taught me. The instances where I've rushed to connect university resources have been the moments where I've failed most readily--so, patience, steadiness are key takeaways for me.

## **Sherita V. Roundtree**

Feminist theories offer an important framework for understanding coalition in community writing. Contemporarily, coalitional work has often become entangled in an effort to collaborate with organizations doing complementary work. Although complementary, these labors are not one in the same. As Karma R. Chávez reminds us in discussing the experiences of Queer migrants, coalition is an unimagined horizon across divided "sites of tension." Chávez continues by explaining that "Coalition cannot be easily categorized, fit into an identity, or fixed on a map. Coalition is not comfortable. It is not home" (147). Coalitional work must take into account the process along with the potential for progress. Often those processes require us to not only sit in the discomfort but also take action in it. As statements like the 1977 "The Combahee River Collective Statement" and many other Black feminist political movements imply, we must assess where we are in the now and continue to reassess.

## **Daniel Singer**

In coalitional writing, "We" keeps its most empowering meaning—A-Many-Led-Us- Speaking-In-Concert. It's our shared act of coming together in pursuit of a common end in common terms—speaking in chorus rather than in singular voice and without calling for the dissolution or devaluing of our separateness, our difference, our ability to be un-totalized by a single collective effort that is likely one of many for any individual coalition member. It says: "We come together for a purpose, but we are more in our own right than that purpose." It says, "We need many nonidentical hands to make the work actually work." It says: "We need to say more, do more, be more than any one of us could on our own; than all of us subsumed by only our common goals could say, do, become."

## **Lara Smith-Sitton**

“Only if we constantly ask ourselves why we take certain actions or teach in certain ways can we hope to make decisions that can sustain later scrutiny and can serve as foundational choices for later work” (Goldblatt 6). This idea aligns with a critical component of the CCW Vision Statement: “a transformation of higher education.” Yet despite burgeoning scholarship about the theory, practice, and pedagogy of community-writing, it can be challenging to know not only what questions to ask ourselves and others but also how our projects can effectuate impactful and needed change. CCW is an organization rooted in building connections between established and emerging community-engaged scholars and then presenting opportunities to listen to and learn from community partners and members. The work to build coalitions enables richer, stronger projects that more thoughtfully consider the needs of all stakeholders and participants.

### **Karen Tellez-Trujillo**

When I think of the Coalition on Community Writing, I focus on the word “community,” as that is my experience with the coalition. Within this coalition, I have found a community committed to social justice, that is dedicated to providing numerous opportunities for bringing about change, whether it’s at a conference, in publication, or through mentorship and support for faculty, students, and community members. Having worked with students on my Southern California campus to create literacy events (Moss, “A Literacy Event”; Branch) and writing opportunities outside the classroom, I believe my foundation of support has come from CCW and from exposure to approaches to community writing that I have learned at conferences and from the Community Literacy Journal. Coalition work means coming together to make our communities a better place, and CCW gives us the support and resources we need to do just that.

### **Don Unger**

Coalition building means creating strategic alliances with other organizations over a particular issue. The organizations might not agree on root causes or long-term solutions, but they agree that the issue needs to be dealt with. For example, during the 1980s and 1990s, many feminist organizations built coalitions to defend Planned Parenthood from attack by Operation Rescue (OR) and other groups that were attempting to shut clinics down, attack employees, and harass clients. Groups like the National Organization for Women (NOW), the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws (NARAL), and the National Women’s Rights Organizing Coalition (NWROC) called out their members to participate in joint actions around the country to ensure that OR did not impede a person’s right to have an abortion. Beyond coming together for these direct actions, NOW, NARAL, NWROC, and others had little in common theoretically or organizationally, and they did not hide their differences. These coalitions exemplify the old leftist motto: march separately, strike together.

## **Bernardita M. Yunis Varas**

The CCW's Emerging Scholars program, with its mission to support young scholars in community writing, can further its coalition-building mission by engaging the Emerging Scholars in bimonthly gatherings. These meetings will bring scholars together to reflect on growing scholarship and emerging theories, bridging academic spaces between elders in community writing and young scholars, setting up intentional spaces of mentorship and sustainability in leadership and writing.

## **Kate Vieira**

My community writing work recently has involved collaborating with writers, educators, and activists in Colombia to think about, practice, and teach writing for peace. For us, "peace" is impossible without equitable social relationships. So really what we're after is writing for healing and change, which involves as much listening as writing.

My collaborators have worked for years in areas impacted by Colombia's armed conflict. And me, I work here in the U.S. with teachers, who are definitely not working in contexts characterized by peace. Our legacies of violence are different, and it's important to remember the U.S. has had a more than minor role to play in worsening the conflict in Colombia. But here we are, writing and teaching together because we believe that across languages, cultures, and borders we can develop shared practices, shared solutions, shared ways forward. I am beyond grateful to belong to the Coalition for Community Writing, where others are developing similar partnerships, where the slow and difficult and joyous nature of this work—the deep meaningfulness of it—is shared and understood and supported. This shared understanding allows us to progress.

At the 2019 CCW, poet and activist Dr. Jhoana Patiño Lopez and I presented on a Writing for Peace community-authored book and board game we co-edited. In 2021, the co-founders of the writing-for-peace organization, EncantaPalabras, Juana María Echeverri and Rodrigo Ospina Rojas, presented on principles of writing for peace that we are developing. Each time, there was an opening, an understanding, a shared recognition. The Coalition for Community Writing reminds us that our work is never done in isolation.

## **Ada Vilageliu-Díaz**

I understand community writing as an opportunity to produce transformative community engagement through writing. At the same time, and more importantly, I see how this community approach must also include coalitional spaces to work. As a Canary Islander of African Indigenous descent, I enjoy finding, joining, and creating communities that allow me to collaborate and contribute, especially when we share similar histories or experiences as BIPOC. CCW is a

very important space for me since I discovered it in 2019 and found a community of women that reminded me of the need to find or create nurturing safe spaces for BIPOC academics, students, and community workers who are constantly facing microaggressions and erasure in academia.

That is why I joined the organization as a board member and proposed we formalize safe spaces at academic organizations and conferences so that we can explore ways of addressing the need for safe spaces while simultaneously providing one. This year, we have prepared a Deep-Think Tank safe/healing space at CCW that would be run from a BIPOC perspective that we hope gets the movement started. I have also applied what I learned at CCW to CCCC by helping create a Black/Latinx/Native scholars coalition through which we just submitted a full day workshop at the next CCCC convention.

### **Stephanie Wade**

What I love about coalitional work is that it allows us to live the equation that  $1 + 1 > 2$ , because together we can do things that are impossible individually. For me, this means showing up for projects that others have organized, from hauling garbage at a city clean-up to attending a departmental open house, and looking for and listening for opportunities to make connections, to channel resources to underserved communities, and to contribute to the creation of inclusive spaces—both material, such as gardens, and ideological, such as publication opportunities—for creative work. My experience teaching community writing and serving on the CCW board continues to teach me about the essential connections between material work and culture work, the value of the relationships that grow from these projects, and the rich knowledge that comes from slowing down and engaging in this work.

### **Christopher Wilkey**

For me, community writing originates through rhetorical situations that invite readers and writers to seek out encounters with the most vulnerable and oppressed for the sake of learning how to live. Coalition-building is inherent in this process, as all interlocutors are dependent on each other in establishing rhetorical agency through the work of social change. CCW strives to amplify such instances of rhetorical agency through a re-imagination of community-university partnerships as aligned with the work of social justice.

## **Using Distributed Definition Building to Understand Strengths and Gaps**

What can we learn from these responses? They offer very different ideas for what coalition and community writing mean. Sometimes one person's definition is at odds with another person's. What is essential for one, another may not mention. Even amongst board members, no single definition could



encapsulate the variety of ideas, identities, projects, and ethical considerations. And that has the potential to be CCW's strength.



Figure 1: Word cloud of the board member responses, generated through freewordcloud-generator.com

The table below lists the top 25 words used across the responses and the frequency with which they occurred:

Frequency	Word
58	Community(ies)
34	writing
39	Work(ing)
28	Coalition(al)
15	Need(s)
14	together
12	scholars
9	Engage(ment)
9	spaces
8	Just(ice)
7	peace
7	shared
6	across
6	space
6	organization
5	important
5	support
5	safe
5	needs
5	partners
5	practices
5	emerging
5	projects
5	change
5	relationships

Figure 2: Table lists the top 25 words used across the responses and the frequency with which they occurred.

When we think about what community writing can do across a large number and scope of projects, there are many, many possible definitions, as we can see reflected even across this small group. As the word cloud and table display, there are also some key similarities across the definitions. In coalition building, we can look for similarities and for reminders to ensure our programming and resources align with needs. The reflections prioritize ethical relationships. Several mention breaking barriers of silos, hierarchies, and knowledge-holding. Some mention using resources to circulate and amplify community member stories and knowledges. Some prioritize amplifying and supporting scholars of color. These similarities in the definition building point to CCW's core values, what we aspire toward in community writing, the trunk that grows into many branches with many leaves.

Other definitions may indicate more specific key elements of what helps CCW align values with actions, i.e. Megan's comment about ethically bringing in and compensating non-academically affiliated community members is a core part of what community writing might entail. Her definition tells me, as a coalition leader, that maybe the organization needs to prioritize reciprocity as central to the definition of who we are. Sherita brings up the importance of acknowledging strength in differences and in acting through and in discomfort. Her citation of Black feminist and Latina works reminds me that maybe "community writing's" definition mandates an antiracist commitment. Sweta and Kate remind me that the Coalition includes people outside the United States and that maybe we need more programming to better include international audiences. These examples show how those helping to build or lead a coalition can carefully listen to what people define as essential to the work or the mission. Then, this distributed definition building can help maintain accountability and can advance new ideas for programming and needs that any one individual may not have considered. Distributed definition building can help coalition leaders look for gaps in representation; it can help shed light on what members value; it can offer new ways to acknowledge and celebrate people; it can lead to new ideas for programming and resources.

In coalitional work, core principles and shared goals offer stability and support. But, stability does not mean rigidity. Community writing for Sweta might mean her global work with Nepal. For Paul, it may mean working with incarcerated writers. For Jessica and Don, it may mean the work they each do with gender equity and justice. For Ada Vilageliu-Díaz, it may mean her work to build Safe Spaces inside and outside of academia. Each person's definition is different. However, as Kate Vieira reminds us, while the projects may be different, "our work is never done in isolation." Distributed definition building offers a flexibility, a capaciousness, a generosity of ideas needed to build justice-focused coalitions in which each member can grow in ways they need, bolstered and perhaps even transformed by the support, resources, and ideas of others, and they can help others to do the same.

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