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Circulating Literacies: When Storytelling Meets Policy

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Circulating Literacies: When Storytelling Meets Policy-Making

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Abstract

We have recently come to terms with a rush of xenophobia, both on the federal and local level. Racist and discriminatory policies have always been at work, but they have been given a higher platform in recent times. This project attempts to understand how and why racist rhetoric is allowed to exist, and how marginalized voices can be circulated throughout the public sphere to maintain their own agencies.

The term “literacy” is typically limited to the Western definition of “reading and writing English”. This project attempts to disrupt that hegemonic narrative, and instead make way for other types of literacy tradition that have and do exist outside of the Western Literacy Tradition. In acknowledging and learning about non-Western literacies that have existed outside of colonial and post-colonial spaces, we can begin to understand how storytelling is used to pass on information and serve as a tool for community organizing in different groups.

The city of Syracuse is home to many communities that have been victims of racialized space, and continue to have their agencies denied by institutions of power like mainstream media, the academy, and the government. This Capstone addresses different community literacies that have taken place in the city of Syracuse, and speaks of how these literacies have been able to be circulated past the spaces that they were created to help change hegemonic narratives and discourses happening about marginalized people without marginalized people.

In analyzing functional community literacies, we can also look into how to provide a platform for refugee populations to be able to maintain their cultural dignities and traditions upon entering Western space. Much of the current refugee resettlement rhetoric and policy-planning is centered around assimilation, and frequently pushes for refugee populations to forget their own histories. As refugees continue to become a more heated and controversial topic in the Western rhetorical sphere, it is imperative that their own voices and experiences be able to maintain their agency and independence.

At the same time, it comes down to the people existing within the academy to also acknowledge their privilege and acknowledge the role of the university in often maintaining hierarchies that put down marginalized groups. We must hold ourselves accountable to making progressive social change.

Executive Summary

The purpose of this Capstone is to disrupt the dominant narrative surrounding marginalized identities. The focus is on communities in the city of Syracuse, NY, specifically communities of color that are often misrepresented in mainstream media, and whose struggles and experiences have been historically left out of the public sphere. The problem with stories about the city of Syracuse, is that they are rarely being circulated and told by the residents of Syracuse. Much of the rhetoric driven about Syracuse is through headline sellers: “29th poorest city in America”, “One in two children in Syracuse lives in poverty”, “Highest percentage of children with lead poisoning”, “Syracuse has the highest rates of both black and Hispanic concentrations of poverty in the nation”. Such statistics are important to know, and should not be diminished in value-- it is important to discuss them, so that they can be addressed. However, what happens too often is that rhetoric like this serves to dehumanize the population that actually lives and occupies the space that is being discussed. Decisions are made according to these accounts that directly impact the people they represent with little input from or attempt to understand the people that will actually be impacted by the policy.

This project seeks to provide a critique on exclusive rhetoric that is rooted in oppressive language by advocating for more accessible and social-justice oriented spaces that allow marginalized voices to be heard and to circulate. The project consists of a literature review that serves to establish community literacies as existing outside of the confines of the academy, and serves to problematize the dominant rhetoric surrounding community literacies. It addresses the hegemonic narrative that defines “literacy” and situates the term “literacy” in the current Western cannon. It then provides a more robust? definition of literacy that allows for a variety of different rhetorical traditions to be considered and shows that different forms of literacy do and

have always existed. The literature review also serves to address the elitism of the academy and its role in the past in not acknowledging literacies that did not subscribe to the definition set by the Western Literate Tradition. Finally, the literature review discusses how refugee literacies are talked about in the academy, and points out that many scholars write refugees as “victims” and do not establish them as agents of their own identities. They are “strangers” that are to be talked about, and their experiences and cultures are not centralized in refugee policies and resettlement.

I will portray my research through a snapshot of three community literacies that are present in Syracuse—the Photovoice project of Southside mothers in the Syracuse Community Health Center, the Writing Our Lives writing group on the Southside of Syracuse, and literacy workshops of the La Casita Cultural Centre. These are three community literacies that work to disturb the dominant narrative of the communities in two stigmatized neighbourhoods, while at the same time providing a space for community members to come together and share their stories and create spaces that they are otherwise denied. However, these are also three community literacies that carry with them the presence of a university-community partnership, and I will be discussing the negotiation of power dynamics that must happen when Syracuse University enters into the community. There is often a “rescuer” rhetoric that happens with community-university partnership programs, where the University places itself on a higher pedestal than the community through its publicity decisions and the elitist mindset it instills and perpetuates in its students, and does not always acknowledge its role in the exclusive rhetorical sphere as an institution with a white supremacist history.

This begins a feminist rhetorical analysis of how refugee communities are discussed in mainstream media in Syracuse, highlighting several articles in Syracuse.com. This chapter will also focus on a lack of English language learning programs that provide a social justice

framework that ensures the survival of cultures, languages, and literacies of refugee communities. I will discuss how writers may enter the community and use their ally-ship as a way to not “transform” or “change” the literacies happening, but to translate them to mainstream media by acknowledging the agency and complexities of identities existing in refugee communities.

The conclusion of this Capstone will be a call for writers that are being trained in the academy to be more critical of the academy’s role in excluding marginalized voices and to work to advocate for more inclusive spaces that provide the opportunities for marginalized voices to be given opportunities to speak for themselves. The Capstone is an attempt to push back on how we define and see “alternative literacies”, and how writers and composition workers can make changes to mainstream media and the public sphere.

Table of Content

Abstract	x
Executive Summary	x
Acknowledgements (Optional)	x
Advice to Future Honors Students (Optional)	x
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Community Storytelling and Me.....	2
Disinvestment in Syracuse.....	3
The Southside.....	7
The Near Westside.....	8
Northside.....	9
Purpose of Study.....	10
Methodology.....	11
Chapter 2: Literature Review: Redefining Literacy	12
An Exclusive Rhetorical Sphere.....	12
The Literacy Myth.....	15
Community Literacies in Action.....	20
Writing Circles.....	23
Other Forms of Literacy.....	25
Chapter 3: Community Literacies in Syracuse, NY	31
A Place We Call Home: Southside Mothers.....	31
La Casita Spoken Word Series.....	34
Writing Our Lives on the Southside.....	39
Analysis of University-Communtiy Partnerships.....	42
Feminist Analysis.....	44
Chapter 4: Refugee Literacies in Syracuse	46
Literacy Amongst Refugee Populations.....	46
Analysis of the Rhetoric Used to Discuss Refugee Populations by the Post Standard.....	49
Non-Profits in Syracuse.....	52
Storytelling and Social Justice in Refugee Literacies.....	53
Chapter 5: Conclusion	56
The Role of the Writer.....	56
Final Reflection.....	57
Works Cited	60

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And, finally, thank you to the Syracuse community. Thank you for my re-education and my un-learning. I came onto this campus a pampered, privileged student who was willing to be complacent to the institutions of oppressions at work. I will make it a life's mission to stay woke.

Advice to Future Honors Students

Be nice to yourself throughout this project. It's not a very easy journey. At least it wasn't for me. It took me a while to find a topic that I was interested in, a while to find an advisor that I thought I could work well with, a while to do research, a while to write, and a while to get it done. Every step was challenging and filled with obstacles, but I realized that being too hard on myself was more of a distraction that ultimately hindered the project than it did help it.

So go easy on yourself! Write about something that *you* want to write about. Pick an advisor who you can be honest with, and who you won't dread having meetings with. Surround yourself with friends who take this project as seriously as you, and choose your Capstone buddy wisely.

No matter how far behind you feel, it is important to keep pushing. There were times where I was convinced that there was absolutely no way my paper could get done. I was overcome by fear in even opening my word doc to *look* at my Capstone. For those times, I would recommend reading Anne Lamott's essay "Shitty First Drafts"—then, take a deep breath, get some coffee from Pages, call your mother and complain for a bit, and then open the word doc. It will be hard for the first five minutes—but before you know it, your world will center around this Capstone, and nothing else will seek to exist.

Best of luck to you.

Chapter 1

Introduction

On August 15th, 2016, Wendy Long, the Republican nominee for U.S. Senate in New York, took a stroll through the North Side of Syracuse. Armed with the camera on her phone, and her twitter account, Long proceeded to let the internet know her unfiltered, unapologetic thoughts about the residents of the North Side.

A picture of two woman in traditional head coverings was captioned, “Catholic Charities takes federal tax dollars to resettle the refugees we can’t screen. Leaves the Catholics to ISIS.” A picture of the Mariam The Mosque of Jesus, son of Mary-- that had at one point been a church-- was accompanied with, “Welcome to Syracuse: Holy Trinity Church, beautiful church of German and Italian immigrants, is now a mosque.”

There were other accusations. The neighborhood became a place of “Crime, prostitution, money laundering.” The residents were accused of being caught up in a “cycle of poverty” that fostered a “cycle of drugs, and cycle of gangs”. When asked what her purpose was, Long responded that “She wanted to draw attention to what she heard from *some residents* about changes to their neighborhood since the church conversion began in 2014” (Weiner, “GOP Senate candidate Wendy Long links crime with Syracuse mosque”).

The question becomes: which residents? And if true, why would these complaints be voiced through a politician instead of through the actual residents of the North Side? The residents of the North Side were characterized as terrorists, money launderers, gangsters, and drug abusers. To make matters worst, such stinging and coded labels were not from just anybody-- they were from a politician with the power to influence and push public policy that could very well impact the lives of the residents.

Wendy Long's rhetoric echoes that of President-Elect Donald Trump when he discusses immigrants in the United States: tales of rapists and killers who are coming into the country were abundant during the President-Elect's campaign, along with exclamations of rising violence due to an increase in immigration.

We have seen the power of this rhetoric to shape viewpoints founded in fear and anger. Displacement of peoples and communities due to racist policies that saw them as burdens and not as citizens have led to the marginalization and oppression of communities since the founding of America. It is important to identify the reasons these policies exist, and which institutions continue to be complicit in their oppression.

Community Storytelling and Me

I grew up in North York. A district of Toronto in which 57% of the population was not born in Canada, and 52% is categorized as a visible minority (Statistics Canada). Before the seventh grade, my relationship and experience with my neighborhood was highly dependent on my parents. Both of my parents had come to Canada as Iranian refugees in the early 1980s; they had been among the first to make up the Iranian diaspora in Toronto. By the time I came around in the mid-90s, the Iranian community had gradually shifted from government housing in the eastern end of North York to the northern end that is still referred to as "little Persia" (Michael, "Plaza is a piece of Iran in North Toronto").

While I spent the early years in my childhood very much entrenched in my community--attending YMCAs, participating in local dance and Taekwondo academies-- I spent my middle-school years in a predominantly-white private school that my parents felt would give me a "better chance of college" than anything the public education had to offer. To be fair, my first year in a public school had resulted in an incident where a white teacher had confessed that she

felt that students with a second language at home were often “disabled” from being able to pursue great heights in a predominantly-English classroom.

The hope with me attending a private school was that there would be some accountability towards ensuring all students had an equal chance at success and achievement. Instead, I was thrust head-first into the population of Toronto that had previously left the city when the immigrants had started coming in. My classmates were primarily from the richer and whiter suburbs of the city, or lived in the wealthy, white-segregated areas. It was not until later when I moved into a public high school near my home, that I realized how much of an impact I had felt as an outsider in a predominantly white-space, where the narrative about me and my community was being shaped by an outside voice.

Purpose of Study

The problem with stories about the city of Syracuse, is that they are rarely being circulated and told by the residents of Syracuse. Much of the rhetoric about Syracuse is through headline sellers: “29th poorest city in America”, “One in two children in Syracuse lives in poverty”, “Highest percentage of children with lead poisoning”, “Syracuse has the highest rates of both black and Hispanic concentrations of poverty in the nation” (Syracuse.com). Such statistics are important to know, and should not be diminished in value—however, it is important to discuss them, so that they can be addressed. However, what happens too often is that rhetoric like this serves to dehumanize the population that actually lives and occupies the space that is being discussed, and decisions are made that directly impacts a group of people, without there being any input or attempt to understand the people that will actually be impacted by the policy.

By listening and reaching out to community circles, we can begin to understand the stories that are being shared by community members between one another. In examining

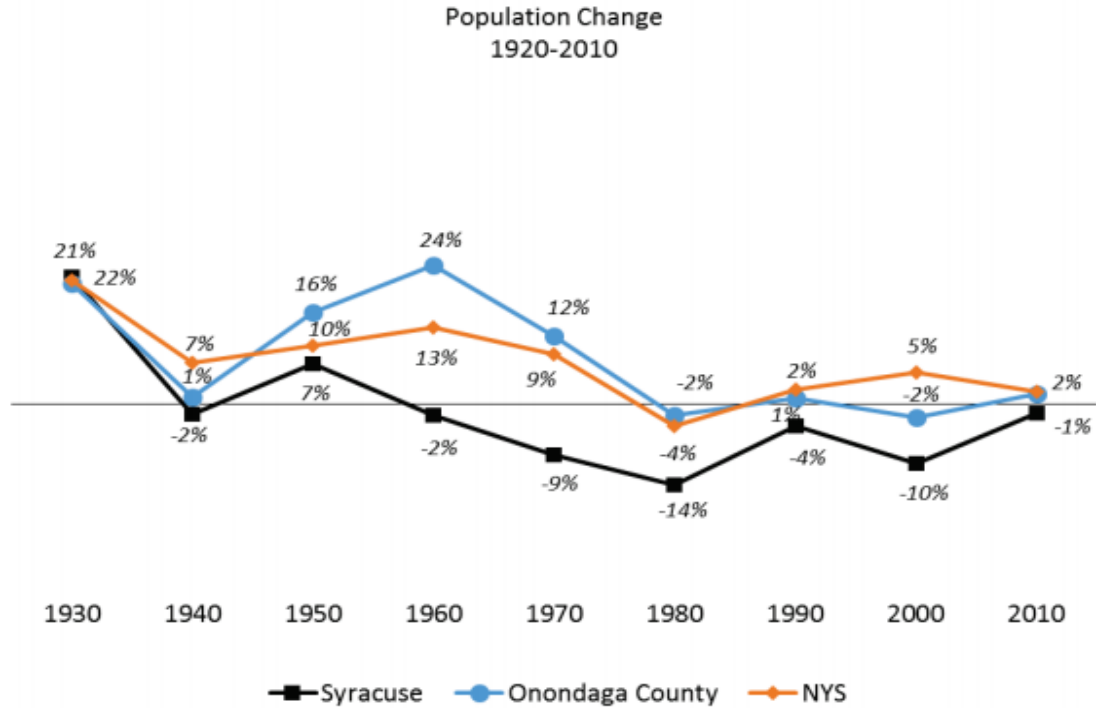
community spaces that foster storytelling between members, community leaders and advocates can assist in combatting and resisting linear, racist, and xenophobic narratives that are often circulated about the residents of marginalized groups. A community that is able to provide space for stories of residents told by themselves introduces a form of democratic action that has been long sought after but rarely obtained in the history of post-colonial North America.

In addition, this project is also attempting to provide a critical analysis on the role of the academy in the community. Syracuse University, like many other universities, comes from a place of privilege and power. The people at Syracuse University have significantly more influence in mainstream media and in the public sphere than many marginalized voices in the community. It becomes imperative to assess whether the University is acting for progressive social change, or whether it is reestablishing oppressive norms. One of the action plans attached to this project is for writers from the academy to “choose sides” and commit themselves to social change movements, and shed themselves of the elitism of the academy while still using their privilege to access exclusive spaces and help circulate grassroots narratives.

Disinvestment in Syracuse

In order to discuss the rhetoric circulating about Syracuse, it is important to know the city's history. Since the 1950s, Syracuse has seen an overwhelming decrease in its population as more and more people have moved to the wealthier and more resourceful suburbs.

1. After 1950, the Syracuse population began a steady decline through 2010, representing a total decline of 34%, 1920-2010.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau²⁰

Figure 1, Below the Line Community Benchmark Project

The graph above shows the decrease in the population of Syracuse in comparison to Onondaga County and New York State overall. 1950 was a focal point for the city because it marked the construction of the I-81 highway. A highway that many label as being directly responsible for the level of concentrated poverty in the city today.

Syracuse, like many rust belt cities, had recently undergone a demographic transformation with the arrival of hundreds of black residents who participated in the “North Migration,” in which many members of the African American community fled persecution in the south of the United States. The area that they settled in was called the “15th Ward.”

The story of the 15th Ward is a top-down representation that led to a policy change that impacted people that were never given a chance to speak for themselves. While residents of the

area knew it to be a close-knit community with a warm and welcoming atmosphere, the 15th Ward was being painted as a “slum” in mainstream media that was circulated to the rest of the city. The 1950s was also the time of an “urban renewal” movement, where there was a great pressure and push for cities to renovate their urban cores with infrastructure that would expand to suburban areas. Robert Moses, one of the most influential and powerful city-planners of the 1950s, once said: "our categorical imperative is action to clear the slums and we can't let minorities dictate that this century-old chore will be put off another generation or finally abandoned”.

Raised highways that went through city centers were often constructed with the purpose were constructed with the intention of creating a divide in cities, of running through “slums” or “unwanted areas” under the guise of eliminating traffic through a city's core. It was with this mentality that I-81 was built, completely destroying the 15th Ward and leaving 1300 residents without homes.

Ironically, Syracuse today has a higher concentration of poverty than it ever did during the 15th Ward. Today 35% of the population in the city lives below poverty, with a 41% increase in poverty from 1970-2000. An overwhelming amount of the people living in poverty are people of color, with 1 in 2 black residents living below the poverty line, and 35% of the city’s foreign-born population living in poverty as of 2013. Syracuse has been cited as a city with the highest concentration of poverty in both black and hispanic populations from data collected in a 2015

study entitled “The Architecture of Segregation” that used data from the American Community Survey.

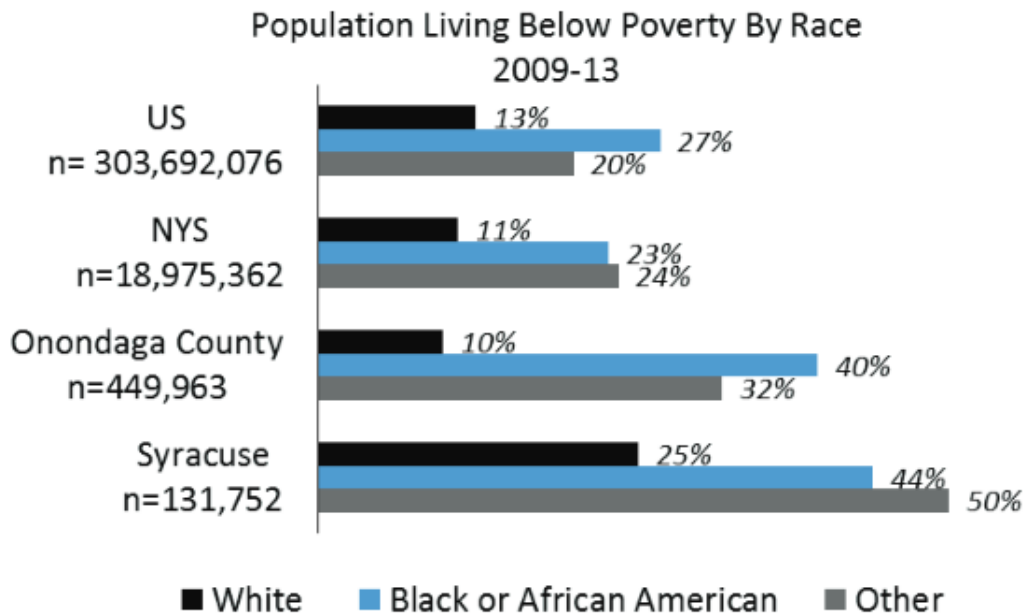
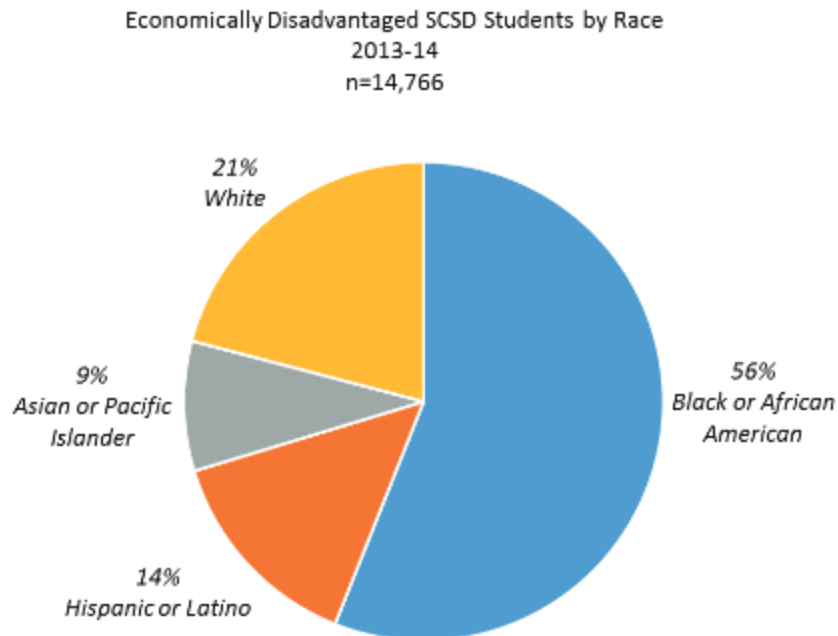


Figure 2, Below the Line Community Benchmark Project

The cycle of poverty in Syracuse has incredibly damaging results for all individuals, regardless of socioeconomic status, living in high-poverty neighborhoods. 77% of students in the Syracuse City School District are classified as “economically disadvantaged”, with 7 out of 10 students qualifying for free meals in the school that they attend (“Below the Line”). Many low-income families also do not have access to a car, and are therefore highly limited in their transportation and mobility.



Source: Data collected from Syracuse City School District Enrollment Data,
<http://data.nysed.gov/enrollment.php?instid=800000040902&year=2014>

Figure 3, Below the Line Community Benchmark Project

A study done by the Onondaga Citizens League in 2016 found that much of the current transportation outlets for Syracuse are available only for car-owners, and there was extraneous stress on low-wage employees with multiple jobs and for newcomers to be able to find their way around and out of the city to their place of work (“How CNY Moves” 6).

Three neighborhoods in particular have felt the brunt of an increase in poverty: The Southside, the Near Westside and the Northside.

The Southside

When the residents of the 15th Ward were displaced after the I-81 highway was built, the Southside went from being a predominantly white neighborhood to a predominantly black one. Once previous residents of the 15th Ward began to move into the Southside, white residents were quick to move to the suburbs that the highway now provided ample access to. Racism in the city

persisted even with the “white flight” movement that had decreased the number of whites in the city by 20% between 1950 and 1970. Many Black residents weren’t able to find employment, despite having the credentials to work in their designated fields. Housing segregation was also an issue-- where redlining policies had prevented many families of color from being able to receive loans for affordable housing (Samuels para 5).

At the present moment, the Southside is 68% black with 40% of the whole neighborhood living below the poverty line. 30% of residents do not have cars at their disposal, and 54% of residents live in homes built before 1939 (“Below the Line”). This is significant because Syracuse has the highest percentage of lead-poisoned children in the country, a result of living in housing with decaying lead paint (“Below the Line”).

The Near Westside

The residents of the Near Westside in the early 1900s were part of the elite-class in Syracuse.

The neighborhood was at one point home to the richest and wealthiest in the area, with large and well-decorated homes. A fountain with bronze statues also stood in the neighborhood square, a symbol of prosperity and city pride and investment (Post Standard Archives).

Today the Near Westside is home to Syracuse’s Latino population. Many of the houses that were built for the wealthy residents before the 1950s are still intact, though with significantly less care provided to them. In 2015, the United Way of Central New York cited the Near Westside as one of the poorest neighborhoods in Upstate New York (CNYcentral.com). The area was particularly highlighted for its high level of child poverty. The neighborhood also hosts Fowler High School, the high school with the lowest graduation rate in Syracuse City School District (30%) (CNYcentral.com).

Northside

The Northside had traditionally been home to Italian and Polish immigrants that had moved into the city in the late 1800s. In 1901, the city allocated \$25,000-- then a hearty sum-- to build a park in the Northside. Such invested disappeared quickly when focus became directed more to the suburbs than the city.

As of 2000, 10,000 refugees have been resettled into Syracuse's Northside. A great reason for this is that many of the Italian and Polish families are now a great deal older, and children have moved out of the city. Their houses are bought by landlords, who sell them for cheap prices to refugees moving into the area. The affordable housing comes at a cost-- with higher vulnerability of moving into homes built before 1939, and being exposed to lead paint. In fact, 49% of the houses in the North Side were built before 1939.

A study of poverty in 2013, found that "45 percent of the foreign-born population lives in poverty". It was also determined that "One in three individuals in high concentrated poverty areas live in a household in which English is not spoken at home, compared to 20 percent of the population in which a language other than English is spoken at home".

Chapter 2: Literature Review:

Redefining Literacy

This literature review serves as an attempt to disrupt the dominant rhetoric surrounding community literacies. It addresses the hegemonic narrative that defines “literacy” and situates the term “literacy” in the current Western tradition. It then provides a more robust definition of literacy that allows for a variety of different rhetorical traditions to be considered, and shows that different forms of literacy do and have always existed. The literature review also serves to address the elitism of the academy, and its role in the past in not acknowledging literacies that did not subscribe to the definition set by the Western rhetorical tradition.

An Exclusive Rhetorical Sphere:

In order to understand why a voice like Wendy Long’s or Donald Trump’s be hailed and circulated more widely than the voices of minority and marginalized groups both in and out of Syracuse, we need to look to how our rhetorical canon privileges some over others.

Being critical of the rhetorical canon begins with understanding and admitting to the complacency of rhetoricians and writers in upholding the Rhetorical Tradition. As First Nation writer and activist, Malea Powell, writes, “.... the Tradition begins with the Greek, goes Roman, briefly sojourns in Italy, then shows up in England and Scotland, hops the ocean to America and settles in” (Powell 397) It goes without saying that discourse surrounding rhetoric and writings from other rhetorical traditions is rare in the Western canon, and other traditions are scarcely ever absorbed into *the tradition* so that they may be immersed into the fabric of Western educational thought.

It was bell hooks' who first coined the phrase *white supremacist patriarchy* to speak to how institutions in the U.S. are founded upon white, supremacist, patriarchal ideologies (bell hooks para 2). Indeed, many scholars speak to the “othering” that takes place to allow Euro-Western institutions to achieve and maintain their power. In her book, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Colonialism*, feminist Sarah Ahmed speaks to the creation of “strange bodies.” She describes how some bodies-- namely those that belong to underrepresented minority groups-- are presented as solely material, as “disembodied objects” that can be “commodified and exploited”. As she writes,

Strangers are not simply those who are not known in this dwelling, but those who are, in their *very proximity*, already recognized as not being, as being out of place. Such a recognition of those who are out of place allows both the demarcation and enforcement of the boundaries of ‘this place’ as where ‘we’ dwell. The enforcement of boundaries requires that somebody—here locatable in the dirty figure of the stranger—has already crossed the line, has come too close

(21-22).

In *Between Abundance and Marginalization: the Imperative of Racial Rhetorical Criticism*, Lisa A. Flores discusses how raced bodies are perceived as “threats”, and how Black masculine bodies in particular are perceived as “dangerous, threatening, and out of control” (Flores 14). The “othering” of a raced body allows for the white body to continue to remain “pure” and “innocent”-- despite the violence that was used to maintain that image. If people of color are guilty for not being white, then white continues to be normalized and “made invisible”.

The results of a rhetorical sphere that continues to uphold and privilege the white race can be seen in the current political, economic, environmental, educational, cultural, and social struggle of communities of color across the country. Under the pretense of “multiculturalism”

which argues that the *same* treatment towards groups is *equal* treatment, the educational system has implemented high standardized tests that allow for students to be judged and marked with no thought towards the political and socioeconomic conditions that schools and families must struggle through (French). In Syracuse, the program of Say Yes to Education offers free tuition to some of Upstate New York's highest ranking universities upon the graduation from a high school in the Syracuse City School District-- nevertheless, graduation rates continue to remain stubbornly low because the policy and the program does not acknowledge the much larger threat and impact of poverty on school systems. As Sarah Ahmed writes, "By redefining difference in terms of cultural diversity, the dominant group is able to celebrate cultural diversity on a discursive level without effectively revealing and acting upon material and bodily difference" (Ahmed 4). In other words, the Syracuse City School District may choose to highlight that 74 languages are spoken in their schools-- but not acknowledge the policy reforms and rehabilitations needed to ensure that more than 0.7% of their elementary students meet the English Language Arts Standard, nor challenge the standard that requires "literacy" to be defined through English-speaking and writing abilities ("Syracuse City School District: Transformation through Collaboration").

Policies that marginalize and oppress groups are often the result of rhetoric being circulated by members outside of the community that is being discussed. In her dissertation, *Contraband Literacies: Incarcerated Women and Writing-As-Activism*, Tobi Jacobi speaks of how public narratives of women in prison are formed primarily by mass media, which relies on crime-inspired dramas to fuel the image of a "chase", in which the "good guys" (often the cops) are on a pursuit to bring justice to a victim's family after a crime has been committed against them. Jacobi quotes Kathleen Watterson, "Killer movies, violent television, and political hot air

about ‘getting tough’ on crime create heat and smoke that obscure the fact that prisons warehouse and destroy the lives of our most poverty-stricken Americans” (8). The result is an overwhelming amount of the American population feeling that the criminal justice system allows for people who are not safe to be separated from the “normal” people in society-- instead of revealing the complex history of oppression and poverty that has allowed the prison industrial complex to effectively become a “warehouse for the poor and mentally ill” (“Incarceration’s Front Door: The Misuse of Jails in America” 4). Jacobi writes of the importance “to create space for narratives of women’s incarceration to circulate-- especially those narratives that counter the stereotypes that are strongly embedded in much of American consciousness” (Jacobi 10).

Such a space would have been valuable during the I-81 project in the 1950s, in which Ward 15 residents were able to speak for themselves and resist the stereotypes that were being forced onto them by the media and politicians in the area. A similar space can be useful to residents of the more disinvested neighborhoods in Syracuse, so as to ensure that false rhetoric does not lead to harmful policy. The creation of such a space requires that those with power and privilege acknowledge the inherent racism and bias within the Rhetorical Tradition and make moves to ensure that the dominant rhetoric that calls for the oppression of marginalized groups is challenged and resisted.

The Literacy Myth

Historically, the definition of “literacy” in Western culture has centered around an individual’s ability to read and write. More specifically, the ability to read and write in English. Among the first Western scholars to attempt to define literacy, Jack Good and Ian Wyatt made the distinction between the oral (illiterate) and the written (literate). Their classic text, *The Consequences of Literacy*, made the distinction between a civilized society that had “progressed”

enough to depend on a superior form of literacy through the written word, while oral methods of communication were solely for the more primitive communities (Goode and Wyatt 5). But it is not scholars and researchers that have a say in what literacy is in the Western public sphere, it is institutions. The Indiana's "Adult Education Handbook", provides a definition for literacy as: "An individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential" ("Adult Education Handbook" 5). The other example of how institutions have come to define literacy is through policies like No Child Left Behind, and other mandated assessment practices that have more or less occupied public education in North America. The idea of assessment practices stems from the belief that there is a "right" literacy requirement that needs to be met through exams, and that these exams can determine whether one is "literate" or "not literate" (Grabill 100). Literacy through institutions is defined as a professional skill, one that can make an individual more successful in the job market.

In his landmark text, *The Literacy Myth*, Harvey Graff discusses the overall assumption in Western thought that literacy leads to rising social mobility, and assures economic and occupational success. The book itself is a critique of this myth, and argues that race, ethnicity, and class have a much more impact on an individual's attainment of wealth and occupational status than literacy. In his first chapter, Graff covers the relationship between literacy and criminality, where he shows that while the number of arrests did not make a distinction between those literate and those illiterate, the number of convictions showed an overrepresentation of an "illiterate population". Graff argues that "The judicial system presumed the illiterate, ignorant, Irish, or idle to be guilty. These expectations lead to convictions" (84). A perfect example of the consequences of an exclusive rhetorical sphere.

Graff writes of the creation of the literacy myth with the association of superiority of certain groups and customs in the West, “the myth of the superiority of the western or Greek alphabet; the myth of literacy and democracy” (640). Graff goes on to explain the representation of the term “literacy”, “as an unqualified good, a marker of progress, and a metaphorical light making clear the pathway to progress and happiness”. Whereas, “illiteracy” is associated with “ignorance, incompetence, and darkness” (640). As Ana Castillo writes in *Massacres of the Dreamers*, “White society insists that only European history and Greco-Roman civilisation have intellectual importance and relevance to our society... The ignorance of white dominant society about our ways, struggles in society, history, and culture is not an innocent and passive ignorance, it is a systematic and determined ignorance” (Castillo 5).

In order to understand the role of literacy in Western culture and in education, an understanding of its use in historical oppression and in the exclusive rhetorical canon must also be studied. The West, and specifically the United States, is an individualistic culture. Literacy is taught predominantly on an individual basis and defined as skills that one can attain through education and schooling. For a very long time, writing was seen as the only method to capture and preserve information. The phrase “Back it up with the literature” refers to a culture predominantly dependent on documented text to legitimize modes of thinking. As a result, other forms of communication and literacy have often been misrepresented and uprooted in Western scholarship.

Other forms of communication, for example oral use, have been framed as “illiterate” and therefore “mistrustful”. In her dissertation, *Literacy Lives Here*, English teacher Suzanne Robinson discusses the colonization of education that occurred in Northern Canada to the first-nation tribes of the area when the Europeans occupied their land. Cultures that had previously

used orality to communicate their thoughts, ideas, art, and overall, culture were suddenly being subjected to the written word. Robinson writes, “The Western Arctic has unusual communication needs; its people rely heavily on both oral and non-verbal techniques. Text is insufficient to capture the wide variety of nuances that accompanies most Northern speech” (Robinson 39). Her dissertation focuses on the importance of finding a way for members of the first-Nation community in Northern Canada to be able to speak about themselves for themselves, and was focused on finding a media platform that would express the diverse literacy existing in the North where the colonizer’s language has been historically enforced in communities.

In the essay, “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What is It?” James Baldwin speaks of the resistance in “Black English”, and the tendency for “Black English” to be critiqued or associated with illiteracy. He writes, “Language... far more dubiously, is meant to define the other-- and, in this case, the other is refusing to be defined by a language that has never been able to recognize him” (para 1). Black English was born out of a need for Black people in the United States to communicate without an oppressive, colonizing gaze consistently marginalizing Black people and communities:

The brutal truth is that the bulk of white people in American never had any interest in educating black people, except as this could serve white purposes. It is not the black child's language that is in question, it is not his language that is despised: It is his experience (para 10). For Baldwin, “language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey” (para 7). For Black people in America, who came to the country as slaves-- kidnapped, bonded, sold-- it became imperative to be able to speak to one another. Of course during chattel slavery times many people came from all parts of Africa and by no means were speaking the same language. It was not until a common tongue was

able to be found, “Black English”, that any true resistance and unity could be formed amongst African Americans. However, another issue that arose from being able to speak “Black English” was the overwhelming assumptions that were placed onto those who spoke “differently”-- “To open your mouth in England is (if I may use black English) to “put your business on the street”: You have confessed your parents, your youth, your school, your salary, your self-esteem, and, alas, your future” (para 4).

Baldwin’s writing reflects the discussions of Harvey Graff’s “Literacy Myth”: the idea that those who are “literate”-- meaning well-versed in English writing and reading-- are somehow superior to others, and therefore, receive greater privileges in society. However, as Graff notes in his text, “Literacy was not in itself an achievement that brought material rewards to individuals. It guaranteed neither success nor a rise from poverty... Social realities contradicted the promoted promises of literacy” (Graff 642). That is, blacks-- no matter how “well spoken”-- still faced a great deal of barriers that prevented them from being able to rise in social hierarchy, largely due to the persistence of racism in the West.

In the essay, *A Personal Reflection of Chican@ Language and Identity in the US-Mexican Borderlands: The English Language Hydra as Past and Present Imperialism*, Professor Aja Martinez discusses the displacement felt by many of Mexican descent whose first language is Chican@ English, a mix of Spanish and English roots. “... Because Chican@ English is not accepted in academic spaces as a ‘real language’, Chican@ students are viewed as not proficient...” (Martinez 214). She reflects on her education, which focused on reading the ‘real’ American and English literature, while completely neglecting any Chican@ literature, “Although theoretical texts can discuss the existence of Chican@ English, this language, as represented

through Chicana literature and art, is brought to life and has the potential to affirm Chicana language and identity” (Martinez 218).

Both Martinez and Baldwin discuss a mis-placed *Literacy Myth* that leaves out many languages and literacies, particularly those of marginalized groups. The perpetuation that “literacy”, defined as “proficiency in Anglo-English writing and reading”, is one that continues to neglect and oppress identities of historically oppressed and culturally different groups. The literacy brought to North America by the colonizers is one linked directly to white supremacy, and it should not be the one that we look to when providing a platform and space for marginalized groups. This is exceptionally important when said-literacy has often been forced onto groups throughout colonial history-- reservation schools, and the “academic spaces” Martinez discusses, being important examples of where children’s cultures were essentially stripped away to make room for “proper” education.

Community Literacies in Actions

It seems self-explanatory that in order for underrepresented groups to be spoken of, there needs to be a space for underrepresented groups to speak for themselves. However, when living in a colonial-occupied space that continues to persist a single-literacy narrative in public and state institutions, it becomes imperative that we as writers do not take lightly the importance of not only discussing, but engaging in resistance and activism. It is important to note the elitism of the academy when speaking about writers and framers of rhetoric. Many of us who study the public sphere, and discursive narratives, are part of an exclusive and highly inaccessible institution and, therefore, come at our research from a privileged stance and economic distance. Because the academy does take so much space in the rhetorical sphere, much of the literature surrounding community literacy tends to be focused on university-community relations leading

to members being referred to as “students” and there being a “teacher” in the program. While this dynamic can exist in certain circles, especially in spaces that are intending to begin the fostering of community literacy, it is important to acknowledge that community literacies can and have existed without the presence of the academy or government institutions that typically monopolize the rhetorical sphere.

An example of this would be the camp meetings held by African American slaves. The camp meeting originated from West Africa, where men and women made joint decisions on societal and government levels as equals. In America, “the meetings brought people together for discussions like escape, family problems, problems with an overseer or slave owners, and passing down the information from one generation to the next , religious worship and other concerns of the slave community”(Belt-Beyan 124). Songs were created to call away slaves in the field, and inform them of a time for the meeting. The song *Steal Away*, thought to be written by Nat Turner, was an example of an expression that notified slaves when a camp meeting was intended to happen:

“Steal away, steal away,
Steal away to Jesus,
Steal away, steal away home,
I hain’t got long to stay here...”
(Belt-Beyan 126).

African American rhetoric has a rich history of community literacy, dating from camp meetings to blues music to hip hop. All African American music has originated from a form of resistance, resistance against the institution of slavery, resistance against racism and cultural hegemony, and resistance against redlining and urban gentrification to name a few issues that

have played consistent themes in African American literacy. In the context of resistance, African American rhetoric was shaped and molded to create a new definition of “Black” in America-- one to counter the racist, oppressive rhetoric of a white state. Through music, communities were able to create a discourse that allowed for not only a narrative to form regarding a life in slavery-- but also brought together a community, and strengthened ties within members.

Different slave songs have been collected throughout history, and many were published in the 1867 anthology *Slave Songs of the United States*, which helped to shape a more in-depth understanding of a life in slavery and those who were in slavery for many free people in the North. This is a prime example of a narrative that has been made by a community that is continuously talked about, but one that has historically never had a hand in shaping the rhetoric prescribed upon them.

In the text, “Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians Use Writing”, Powell writes of how Native peoples have been able to use the “very policies and beliefs about “the Indian” meant to remove, reserve, assimilate, acculturate, abrogate, and un-see us as the primary tools through which to reconceive our history, to imagine our Indian-ness in our own varying and multiplicitous images, to create and recreate our presence on this continent” (Powell 428). In analyzing writings of different Native authors, Powell was able to show how the term “Indian” was able to be reclaimed from a label meant to marginalize and demonize by white settlers, to a term that has been reclaimed and reimagined by Native people today.

An example of this reimagination is the work of Charles Alexander Eastman’s *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*. Eastman reimagines the “Indian citizen”, a character that can exist in Eurocentric America with Native roots and values. His writing is critical of religion, academic institutions, and the Western civilization in general. He writes of a massacre of Native peoples

and cultures on the Dartmouth college, “thinking of the time when red men live here in plenty and freedom, it seemed as if I had been destined to come view their graves and bones”. His writings continue to establish the presence and history of Native people in a now-predominantly white institution. He concludes by writing, “... I have come to continue that which in their last struggle they proposed to take up” (Powell 424). Eastman is an example of many Native writers who have encompassed the rhetorics of survivance into their work. They have contributed in forming a new rhetorical tradition that encompasses Native culture and history, and that allows for an identity to continue to exist and adapt in a colonized space. Their work is therefore larger than the individual writer, it seeks to serve the greater needs of the Native community to resist the white mentality and spaces that have been forced on First Nations people since the settlers arrived on their land.

Community literacies exist outside of the academy. They are often created as forms of resistance, meant to celebrate, appreciate, strategize, push-back, critique, love an identity that a dominant culture has colonized, enslaved, or made invisible.

Writing Circles

Community literacies take on many different forms. One particular form that has great potential in producing counter-narratives, and providing space for marginalized groups to redefine and reimagine for themselves their own existences and identities is the idea of a writing circle.

In her dissertation, *Contraband Literacies-- Incarcerated Women and Writing-As-Activism*, Tobi Jacobi argues that “Prison writing workshops can become a deliberate fissure between institutionalized identity and the agency granted to the ‘unstable’ subject. They can become a place for ‘unfixing’ institutional narratives without the pressure of the ‘skill learning’

that is a signature of many prison courses. Further, they can theoretically move beyond this development of communication skills by creating a space for reflection upon and analyzing racial, gender, and class discrimination, mental and physical abuse, and the life choices that often precede incarceration” (Jacobi 58).

For Jacobi, the workshops serve the purpose of changing the stigma associated with incarcerated women and as a space of healing for women to come together and reflect on their lives and the lives of those around them. Circulating these literacies can counter the racist, oppressive, single-minded narrative that currently frames incarcerated women as “dangerous criminals”. The writing element is important in that the physical text can be presented and distributed to other communities outside the writing workshop, and therefore can shape different narratives.

Lorraine Higgins, Elenore Long, and Linda Flower advocate for the use of community writing: “Narrative writing is a valuable tool for eliciting stakeholders’ situated knowledge, which is grounded in lived experience; people often encode and express this knowledge through various forms of narrative-- anecdote, dramatic reenactments of a problem, or personal stories they share.... Furthermore, narrative can turn individual knowledge into a communal resource. Narrative also has a persuasive power that can help audience identify with the teller’s perspective in a way that abstract and generalized positions or claims do not” (21).

Writing of course is rooted in the Western definition of literacy, of written text being superior to the oral, or to the rhythm. It was in the 1960s that writing in activist circles began to bridge away from the “grammatical and mechanical correctness”, to focus on a creative outlet that allowed for mistakes and personal expression (Becker 26).

Creative writing is a form of resistance. Community writing that provides a space for writers to engage in personal narratives and creative expressions through written work counters the hegemonic, eliteness of the written text in Western culture. The more written works that are produced by people with marginalized identities, the more written works that are circulated, the more they counter other oppressive written texts that dominate the public sphere. The written work is one that can navigate in the Western rhetorical sphere more easily than other forms of literacies, and can therefore have a large impact in changing minds and conversations.

It is important then to be critical of writing circles. Writing circles, while they can be spaces of critical thinking, reflection, and activism, also depend on hegemonic means to work. People from marginalized backgrounds who carry marginalized identities have often been discluded from the rhetorical sphere because of their roots. Writing as a form of expression focuses on the hegemonic language and text-- neither of which have been historically accessible to everyone, and in fact, have been used to colonize and silence communities in the past.

If people from marginalized backgrounds whose literacy has been systematically erased from the public sphere are asked to share their stories solely through writing, they are also being asked to deny the role of writing and the Western rhetorical canon in colonizing their lives and literacies. In that situation, the writing circle can no longer become a space of resistance and community. It instead becomes a space where people are forced to give up their identities, and continue to assimilate themselves into the Western canon, ironically for the sake of “telling their stories”.

Other Forms of Literacy

It becomes essential then that we discuss other forms of literacy and community storytelling that exist outside of the Western canon, and have been historically excluded from Western institutions.

The term “Orature” originates from Negritude Movement in Paris in the 1930s and 1940s, and speaks to the oral tradition that has existed within the African diaspora since West Africa was colonized and thousands were enslaved and brought over to the West. Director of the African American Language and Literacy Program, Geneva Smitherman, coins the “oral tradition” as: “... part of the cultural baggage the African brought to America. The pre-slavery background was one in which the concept of Nommo, the magic power of the Word, was believed necessary to actualize and give man mastery over things” (77-78).

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) conference defined the oral tradition as:

“There are numerous definitions of oral tradition which, in spite of different shades of meaning, hold that it represents, in a primarily oral form, the sum of the information which a society deems fundamental, preserves and codifies the information, to facilitate memorization of it and make sure that it is passed onto present and future generations This information is comprised of knowledge and customs from domains as varied as: history (genealogies of important families, alliances); myths and sacred texts (rituals, prayers, propitiatory expressions and incantations; techniques (leather and fabrics crafts, pottery, wickerwork, jewelry tools); political institutions (rules of succession, matrimonial alliances, land appropriation and rules for land management, exchanges of goods and services); various rites of passage initiations

(circumcisions, excisions, tattooing); musical harmonies, linguistic exercises, coded languages (slang, talking, drum...), etc “(Ndiaye and Dakar 4).

Spoken word is an example of a literacy that was created with resistance roots. The aspect of performance within Spoken Word originates from an oral culture and history that has been systematically overlooked and erased within the Exclusive Rhetorical Sphere. As Biggs-El says, “that spoken word and rap music celebrate cultural formations and performatives of Blackness that are not considered legitimate ways of knowing in the American education system” (18).

In *The Resurgence of Spoken Word: Renaissances of Black Poetry, Thought and Revolution*, Angela Monique Fegget, writes of the works of the artist Carl Hancock Rux. Rux’s style focuses on rhythm, specifically on the role of the drum in the oral tradition of Black literary culture. Fegget focuses on a section of one of Rux’s poems, “Elmina Blues (Pigdin Drum Song)”, “whose theme is that of survival of the African aesthetic and the drum’s significance as part of that aesthetic” (Fegget 41). Rux writes of the horrors and hauntings of the Middle Passage, while focusing on the theme of drums:

dey took away

dey took away the drum

dey took away

dey took away the drum

so ah use my hands

yeh

so ah use myself

yeh

to sing ov da rivah

an da blood

to get across ah use myself

yeh

ah use myself...

an dis prayer is to

da God ah know

to da drum

ov myself

yeh

to da drum ov myself (Pagan Operetta 1999)

Poet, Umar Ben Hassan, a member of the Last Poets also comments on the influence of drums in Afroamerican culture and art:

“As we neared the building... you could feel the drums and chanting and vibrating through the walls. As soon as you came into the presence of the batas, the jembes, and the shango drums your spirit was no longer yours. You were swept up in a tide of awareness and consciousness that was so vibrant, so sensual, so warm, and so very natural that you felt free” (as quoted by Fegget 42).

Fegget writes of the “talking to the drum”, during slavery, where drummed messages “sometimes told of imminent danger or of a rising revolt, what is certain about this form of communication within the oral tradition is that it was implicitly used as a means for speaking to its community through its community” (Fegget 10).

Oral tradition, and the use of drums and chants, also exists in Native American tradition. The “Night Chant” of the Navajo people takes use of drums, and other aspects of the oral tradition to act out a community gathering centered on healing. In the article “The Poetry and Drama of Healing: The Iroquian Condolence Ritual and the Navajo Night Chant”, Jarol Ramsey labels the Night Chant as a “multimedia production consisting by turns, (and sometimes simultaneously) of recitation; singing, both solo and choral; ritual per se, involving the manipulation of a variety of symbolic properties... symbolic drama, dancing; sand painting; and even rites of passage for Navajo children” (Ramsey 88).

The *Night Chant*, and the Oral Tradition that it is part of, serve as examples of storytelling and literacy that are not acknowledged within the dominant definition of literacy in the Western rhetorical sphere as a “written and recorded text”.

Angela M. Haas discusses the significance of seeing a Wampum (a small, short, tubular bead, made from the quahog clam shell), used by Native Americans as records of important civil affairs and for ceremonies. In “Wampum as Hypertext: An American Indian Intellectual Tradition of Multimedia Theory and Practice”, she defines the Wampum as a multimedia technology that can tell stories, and has been used to “record hundreds of years of alliance within tribes, between tribes, and between the tribal governments and colonial government” (Haas 3). There is a literacy that is required to “read” wampum. The placement of beads, the colors, the woven materials, the ceremonies they are presented at, all serve to tell the story of why and how the Wampum came to exist.

The Wampum is also said to exist in Spoken Word. A part of the full Wampum experience involves hearing why it was created, and have its truth and importance testified before an audience. Haas speaks to other forms of literacies that exist in Native American culture

outside of the Wampum, “from birch mark scrolls and canoes, winter counts, petroglyphs, star quilts, songs, drums, double-wall and double-woven river cane baskets, and more to Web sites, blogs, and instant messaging” (Haas 19).

The oral tradition continues to exist in today’s multimedia world. Its presence continues to resist the hegemonic narrative of literacy, and continues to challenge us to accept other forms of storytelling into our narratives and understandings. The Oral Tradition is the language of the oppressed, the ones who were unable to tell their stories in the Western Rhetorical Tradition, and who continue to find new ways of honoring their histories and cultures outside of the exclusive rhetorical sphere.

Chapter 3: COMMUNITY LITERACIES IN SYRACUSE, NY

As it has been argued in the introduction of this text, one of the greatest downfalls of mainstream rhetoric about the people of Syracuse, NY is that the people of Syracuse, NY rarely have an opportunity to be able to shape the rhetoric used to represent them. This has led to a history of marginalization and oppression that continues today in neighborhoods like the Southside, Near Westside, and Northside that house majority non-white, lower-income residents of the city.

It is important then to highlight examples of community literacies that have taken place in marginalized neighborhoods to understand how community literacies might be able to function as a way of giving agency and voice to the members of an underrepresented group. All three of the community literacies that are highlighted in this chapter will have a university-community partnership. This partnership will be examined to hold the academy accountable to its privilege, and to examine how and if community-university partnerships can be created without the interference of the elitism of the university taking up too much space in the community. That is, when the academy enters a space that is meant for marginalized voices—does it silence those voices, or does it uplift them?

A Place We Call Home: Southside Mothers

In her book, *A Place We Call Home: Gender, Race, and Justice in Syracuse*, Professor Kishi Animashaun Ducre highlighted the experiences of 14 mothers who lived in the Southside of Syracuse, NY. All 14 were African American women who had grown up, and were currently living in one of Syracuse's most marginalized and gentrified neighborhoods. Ducre spoke about the work in front of her:

“My task in this book is not to speak for these African American mothers. My task is to amplify and shine light on their lives and experiences, focusing on the ways in which race, gender, and space intersect. To do this, I employ two research methodologies: community mapping and Photovoice” (Ducre 7). The purpose of the project overall was to establish links between space and identity as it is informed by poor and working-class African American mothers in an urban environment.

Ducre describes community mapping as the process of individuals coming together to “create an individual image of their environment, highlighting its assets and deficiencies” (7). The process involved all fourteen Southside mothers working with each other to create a map of their own neighborhood. To examine the areas that for them were “good” or “bad”, the places that were “home”, the places that were “community”. It was important to do this so as to see how the Southside mothers defined their “environment”,

One participant, who Ducre had labelled “Faith” for the purpose of the study, took a picture of her son on a skateboard and entitled it “Needle in a Haystack”. Faith explained, “I took this picture because he be playing around with the skateboard when he was at my mom’s house, so I called him my little black skateboarder, ‘cause you don’t see a lot of Black kids rolling around on skateboards. So I labeled this one, “Needle in a Haystack” ‘cause out of the skateboarders, you probably find one or two of them that are black” (as quoted in Ducre 96). The Photovoice aspect of the project involved cameras being supplied to the women that could be taken home to be used to take pictures, that could be then be printed and put on display. Photovoice is a type of participatory action research project that “aims to use photographic images taken by persons with little money, power, or status to enhance community needs assessments, empower participants and induce change by informing policy makers of community

assets and deficits” (Strack et al. 49).

The South Side mothers were asked to attend weekly workshops that involved teaching the basics of photography, then they were asked to go into their communities and take photographs. In later sessions, participants were asked to select their best images, write captions for those images, and then have a facilitated discussion about the images that they have chosen to highlight various aspects of their community. At the end of the project, there was a community exhibition, upon which the work of the South Side mothers was showcased to community leaders and policy makers. Essentially, the pictures work to disrupt the racialized narrative of the Southside being a “crime-oriented”, “dangerous” neighborhood.

For the community mapping portion of the project, Professor Ducre supplied each of the mothers with a “map of the general boundaries that encompass the South Side neighborhood, a red pencil and a green pencil” (52). The green pencil was meant to mark those areas within in the neighborhood in which the women felt safe and healthy, and were comfortable with having themselves and their children in. The red pencil was to mark the opposite, areas that were unhealthy and unsafe. The process of community mapping allows for the mothers to act as agents over their own environment. Ducre terms the control and independence that the mothers exhibit over their environment, instead of being portrayed as “victims” to their environment, as “place making”.

Photovoice distinguishes itself as an approach that “democratizes knowledge”. While the researcher may choose the theme of the Photovoice project, participants are usually given latitude in interpreting those themes. In regard to research protocol, Photovoice generally involves a series of sessions where participants receive cameras and later return to discuss selected images. Photovoice projects share the purpose of highlighting the everyday lives of their

participants. Photovoice methodology arises out of this conversation and seeks to balance those relationships, between photographer and subject, between researcher and subject, by shifting the power to the subjects or community members. They dictate what's being photographed, and the researcher facilitates discussion around those photographs.

Ducre reflects that when she first began the project, she assumed that many of the photos would be related to the “construction of the wastewater treatment site, along with visible signs of urban decay” (125). However, she noted, that the images revealed much more—many of the photos were positive images filled with community, friends, and family. Ducre discusses how this impacts how we “see” the South Side women, “This work illuminates the struggle of the South Side women. In the midst of what we may see as gritty experience and hard times, they have a great degree of pride about their homes and families. Most revealing is not necessarily the link between South Side mothers and other inner city mothers, but between them and women around the globe who are forced to provide protection for themselves and their families in chaotic spaces. Photovoice balances the relationship between researcher and subject, creating an authentic voice of mothers and upholding the epistemologies of Black feminism that calls attention to the intersection of race, class, and gender” (126).

La Casita Literacy Series

La Casita, translating to “The House” in Spanish, is a community center on the Near Westside. Catering to a large Latino population, the Center functions as an art gallery showcasing Hispanic and Latino heritage and art, while at the same time holding functions and events catered towards the Near Westside population in Syracuse, NY.

The Center has a multitude of projects that work with youth in the community, ranging from dance classes, art workshops, and “reading circles”—in which children are tutored in subjects, and given access to La Casita’s small but rich library of Spanish-based texts.

“The premise of the reading circles is to find and connect literary works that relate to cultural references, with characters are people that you can believe in, people that look like you, people that speak the same language as you” (Teresita Paniagua, personal communication, April 17, 2017).

In the Fall of 2016, La Casita held a workshop series entitled “El Puto Art Studio”. The purpose of the project was to provide “a combination of artistic disciplines such as drawing, design, storytelling and technology. Students will be able to transform abstract marks, forms and concepts to tell narrative stories in imaginative ways” (El Punto Flyer). The participants in the workshop ranged from age 8-12, with numbers ranging for each week but usually balancing at least 8 consistent people. The participants were taught how to use time-lapse photography using ipods that La Casita had provided for them. They were provided with clay to create characters, and then were instructed to create “stories” using the clay.

The workshops were taught by a local artist and Syracuse University graduate. He was a white man named Tom, and it was without a doubt that he took himself a little too seriously. He began the first week of the workshops by asking everyone to go around and say their names, not realizing that he was speaking to a population whose names were significantly more difficult to say than “Tom”, and frequently had to correct himself on the proper pronunciation of several of the participants’ names. In the workshops, he was frequently telling participants that they needed to “behave” and that they “could leave” if they did not follow a specific set of rules that he had established. He was also openly critical of many of the works that the participants would

create—telling them to do their art “right”, and instructing volunteers to pick out the “good work” at the end of class. As a result, it was difficult to form a relaxed environment and the workshops became more like a “class” time where participants eagerly waited for the time to be finished so that they could mingle with the other children in the center.

The children, and myself, were significantly more comfortable in the presence of Teresita (Tere) Paniagua, the Executive Director of La Casita. A Professor at Syracuse University, Tere’s sense of humor, easy going-ness, and Spanish skills allowed her to maintain both respect and affection from the participants in the Center. While she intervened when participants had conflicts with one another, she was also ready to converse and engage in participants in other areas.

The next project for La Casita is a Poetry Series that is planned to amend many of the issues that came up with El Punto. In the past, La Casita has struggled with catering towards a teenage population—though this is the population that has many parents whose children attend La Casita concerned.

La Casita will begin a Spoken Word workshop series with two facilitators: Jazz Rodriguez, a local poet and community organizer with the Vera House, with experience working with victims of domestic abuse, and “court-involved” children in New York City. The second facilitator, Noel Quinones, is a South Bronx native of Puerto-Rican descent. His writing explores the “spirituality of languages, the meanings of diasporic identity, and the ancient and present art of verse” (elninoquinones.com).

Both teachers are fluent in Spanish and come from a Latino heritage, and both have grown up in the Upstate New York area. It is important that the “instructors” for the Spoken

Word workshop series are closer to age to the teenage population that they are working with, but it is also critical that both artists carry similar marginalized identities to the rest of the group.

Spoken Word is also an important art form that has been able to provide a platform for marginalized youth to explore identity and art, without having to deal with the oppression of the classroom. As most of the youth who come to La Casita's programs speak Spanish, language barriers in schools and in communities is a very real problem. Spoken Word provides the platform to be able to connect Spanish and English freely, as well as bringing in cultural and community references.

In her dissertation, *Spoken art pedagogies: Youth, critical literacy & a cultural movement in the making*, Ruth H. Kim speaks of the importance of connecting the works of youth poets with “the cultural formations and communities that exceed them. These poets, in other words, do not produce these poems... in isolation and apart from social and community influences. Quite the contrary, these works are never without, but rather require and demand a community—imagined or otherwise, harmonious and in conflict, as a source and site of differentiated voices and individuals that come, stay, or go in various forms over time...”. Therefore, the spoken word that will be produced by the teens in La Casita will contribute to the public sphere circulating in the Near Westside neighborhood.

Kim goes a step further to making the connection between the community space that allows for “democratic possibilities” that shift the power dynamics in differentiated “productions of knowledge, culture, and dialogue interaction among a many different youth who altogether reflect a kind of barometer for the status of democracy in the wider public sphere” (17). There is no one who can speak of the experiences of being a teenager in the Near Westside than a teenager living in the Near Westside. The La Casita poetry series therefore provides a platform

for youth to be able to become experts on their own identities and their own lives, and shape their own narratives.

A part of the program will also be the use of technology in hopes of circulating the narratives of the youth throughout the community and throughout the center. La Casita hopes to be providing social media and video-producing software and technologies that the youth can use to shape their own media.

In *Arts, Media, and Justice: Multimodel Explorations with Youth* Lalitha Vasudevan and Tiffany Deljaynes, spoke of the importance of inviting humor and improvisation into pedagogical spaces in order to engage youth and affirm a culture of creativity. They confirmed that “Given the space for creative engagement, youth develop a sense that they are controlling their own representation, that they are in control of their own cultural identity, and are creatively shaping and molding language, style, and sense into something new... Multimodal play, therefore, is not a distraction but is in fact a space in which to craft new narratives of being and belonging” (Lalitha & Delijaynes 11).

As with any other community literacy, it is important to provide agency to the underrepresented. La Casita ensures its commitment to multiple narratives and multiple representations and complexities of the youth in the Near Westside, by providing resources and opportunities for youth to tell their own stories through creative means that are often not granted to them in a classroom setting. By establishing that the youth are the “experts” of their own narratives, it also shifts the dynamic of the spoken word workshops—the facilitators do not have the power to tell a participant that their words are not “correct” or their story “not good”. In many ways, the spoken word workshops become a collaborative discussion and team effort, where different experiences of youth in the Near Westside represent through their own creativity.

The final product of the spoken word workshop series will also be able to be circulated to other areas. This allows for the disruption of the hegemonic, dominant narrative of the youth in the Near Westside being “violent” and “gang-related”. While violence and gangs are prevalent in their lives, to use these characteristics to define the people in the Near Westside is to dismiss and silence the complexity of their experiences and lives. The spoken workshop series in La Casita should be able to function as a space for community organizing and creative storytelling for the members of the workshop, while at the same time produce products that can aid in reshaping and resisting a single-narrative on youth in the Near Westside.

Writing Our Lives on the South Side

Professor Marcelle Haddix is the Chair for the Reading and Language Arts Center at Syracuse University, and one of the organizers for “Writing Our Lives”, a youth writing workshop that takes place in the Southside Communications Center in the South Side of Syracuse, NY. The Center itself is funded was initially created and funded by Syracuse University, as a space for community members to come together to plan events and for non-profits to meet and discuss initiatives catered to the South Side community.

Once a year, there is the “Writing Our Lives Conference” held at the South Side Communications Center, which is an all-day event accompanied with different workshops on issues related to youth activism and organizing specifically in urban areas.

Writing Our Lives:

- Focuses on how urban youth writers define, understand, challenge and use writing in and out-of their secondary and post-secondary schooled lives;
- Begins to theorize ways 21st century tools and technologies can be used to promote the writing identity of urban youth writers;

- Accesses the voices of individuals often ignored and active agents in their own learning;
- Encourages, celebrates and supports the writing of urban youth writers as critical ethnographers of their own writing lives; and
- Provides writing events for participants to be leaders of writing instruction for themselves, teachers, peer members of the community

(Marcelle Haddix, Personal Communication, February 28th, 2017).

Along with the annual writing conference there are themed Saturday Writing Events; Afterschool Writing Programs; Summer institutes; Programs Targeting Specific Student Populations. Some central questions that Writing Our Lives intends to have answered include:

- Who are 21st Century Youth Writers?
- What matters to them?
- How are they writing about and documenting their lives?
- If the revolution is to be televised and tweeted, what tools would they use?

Similar to La Casita's spoken word workshops, Writing Our Lives acknowledges the importance of technology in helping to shape the rhetoric of youth. Although the workshop is entitled *Writing Our Lives*, the term "writing" is seen as a fluent means of literacy that does not ask for participants in the workshop to disassociate themselves from oral cultures and traditions. The participants in the workshop participate in spoken word, drawing, oral storytelling, singing, and traditional writing.

Another aspect of Writing Our Lives is the education of Black history, with the intention of "Reading our Past, Narrating Our Present and Composing our Future" (Marcelle Haddix). While the Writing Our Lives workshops are not made up of exclusively Black participants, the workshops are nevertheless curtailed to the youth living in the South Side of Syracuse, NY

which is a predominantly Black neighborhood. Some workshops have included a “Redefining Manhood” theme that involved looking at writers and historical figures like James Baldwin and Malcolm X—with the intention of “Writing for Freedom, Liberation, and Empowerment” (Marcelle Haddix).

Education of the individual for the survival of the community is a concept present in feminist scholarship. In *The Rhetoric of Healing: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood*, Tamika L. Carey speaks of how African American literacies have historically worked “structuring and, when necessary, restructuring African Americans’ understanding of their collective existence and a way to inspire the acts of resistance, reform, and renewal that might advance the whole... reminding African Americans that the work of establishing Black identity and making group progress is only achievable in a “communal context” of collaborative work. Survival is a group project”(Carey 21).

Professor Haddix has spoken of the role of workshops like Writing Our Lives to initiate community “healing” amongst their participants. She writes, “Young people are increasingly dealing with violence and experiencing trauma in their everyday lives. Schools and communities must be prepared to help students deal with these lived realities” (Marcelle Haddix). Haddix refers to the often toxic environment that marginalized youth encounter in schooling and community spaces, where they are either invisible or hyper-visible. Therefore, a schooling space often does not provide the necessary resources and healing that marginalized communities need to survive and thrive in their environment. Carey adds to the rhetorics of healing by casting “healing” as a “goal of sociopolitical action or an educational endeavor, it can refer to a myriad of processes that include resolving crises, identifying social ills, redressing the results of

individual trauma or violence, or covering up disparaging representations and images about Black communities” (pg 46).

In that sense, *Writing Our Lives* functions as a “re-education” for Black youth where they are taught “the ways of knowing, being, and acting that enable them to reread their pasts, revise their sense of self, and resume progress towards their life goals becomes a way to help ensure individual and community survival” (Carey, pg 10). A workshop that unboxes Black masculinity allows for discussions of the oppressive and hegemonic systems that surround Black youth, that marginalize their stories and experiences. Re-education then becomes a learning cure. In the process of addressing the existence and experience of Blackness, the youth in *Writing Our Lives* are then able to move forward as agents of social change.

Analysis of University-Community Partnerships

Professor Haddix provides wise-words to members of the academy who seek to become involved in community literacy groups: “Acknowledge that young people are writing without adult intervention and beyond school walls” (Marcelle Haddix). A large part of the reason that community literacies exist is because institutions tend to be exclusive spaces that contribute to the racialization and white supremacy of the exclusive rhetorical sphere. They exist because marginalized communities needed to find ways to tell stories and survive as communities outside of the paces that were seeking to dismiss, silence, and eradicate them.

It is important to acknowledge the academy’s role in such a space. The University has historically been only for the rich, white, and privileged, and the academy as an institution has yet to acknowledge its elitism. Therefore, if community literacies are to be fostered through University- Community partnerships, it becomes imperative to acknowledge the oppression that

can happen if the academy is not able to leave its elitism behind and provide a space for marginalized communities to conduct their own, traditionally neglected, literacies.

In *This Place We Call Home*, Ducre speaks of a moment where the South Side mothers came onto the Syracuse University campus to produce their photos:

“A campus security officer confronted the group. Even after they explained their purpose on campus, the officer proceeded to personally escort them to the darkrooms. They explained that the officer was dubious about their presence on campus. I was appalled. This incident demonstrated the invisible but pervasive dimensions of privilege between the university and the South Side community. Moreover, it vividly illustrated the impact of the highly surveilled space that exists to maintain those dimensions. The Black women’s bodies were marked as outsiders on the predominantly white, private college campus. Their presence as a group branded them as interlopers, and campus security was quick to respond. The incident was quietly put to rest as the darkroom employee highlighted the features of the computer lab, but I’m sure that none of us would forget it” (90).

The academy is involved in community literacies on a convenient basis. For La Casita, the center attempts to get as much funding as possible from outside sources other than Syracuse University, for the main priority of the University is not providing a space for residents of the Near Westside—but rather for ensuring that La Casita adds to the overall privilege and sociopolitical wealth of Syracuse University’s reputation. As a result, La Casita frequently caters to the predominantly white, rich members of the University who are seeking to “help” and “save” the participants in La Casita’s workshops. However, as Teresita Paniagua remarked, “One of the greatest reasons for tension among the youth who enter La Casita is a disconnection with

their cultural identity in institutional spaces” (Teresita Paniagua, personal communication, April 17th, 2017).

Hence, tension is created when members of the academy who enter community literacies do not acknowledge the privilege and oppressive space that they represent. As Tamika L. Carey notes, “When the teacher or researcher is imbued with more institutional, financial, or social privilege than the individual or group she or he is trying to teach, the slippery discourse of intended outcomes such as ‘social change’ or ‘empowerment’ reflects not only the writer’s worldview, loyalties, and sense of personal power, but also his or her attitudes towards the audience” (Carey 46). As representatives of the academy, it comes onto us to be increasingly aware of our privilege so that we do not silence voices that we are trying to advocate for. In that sense, if we are committed to social change then we must take the necessary steps to centralize our movements around the voices we are trying to advocate for and work to provide more spaces for community literacies to take place, and to acknowledge that community literacies already exist outside of the academy that they have historically been rejected from.

Feminist Analysis

In partnership with writers working alongside community literacies to engage with the exclusive rhetorical sphere comes the growing need for an “owning up” that requires composition writers and rhetoricians to “call out” and identify systems of oppression. In *Rhetoric, Feminism, and the Politics of Textual Ownership*, Andrea Lunsford writes that “working together, feminist rhetoricians can create, enact, and promote alternative forms of agency and ways of owning that would shift the focus from owning to owning up; from rights and entitlements to responsibilities (the ability to respond)...” (Lunsford 535).

In her dissertation (*A Just Literacy*), Tracy Carrick extends upon the concept of “owning up” to “recognizing that to fully understand literacy and the bodies who inhabit educational spaces, educators must consider not just how literate practices make sense for *their* perspectives, but also how they have meaning in various *other* contexts, especially the material contexts in which they developed” (5). In effect, a feminist approach to community literacy calls for a space where marginalized identities may come together to tell their stories, and that their identities and bodies become central to any composition that is written about them and used to change the dominant narrative.

Therefore, any writer must recognize their own privilege before beginning to write. In the case of university-college partnerships, it is critical that the elitism and exclusivity of the academy be addressed—and that the writer “hold social institutions accountable for the ways they historicize their own literacy practices and pedagogies” (5).

In her famous essay, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”, Audre Lorde was necessarily critical of white feminists who spoke of the importance of “coming together” and “leaving behind differences” to stand against sexism, “The failure of academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower” (Lorde, pg 2). Lorde speaks of the “master’s concerns”, where it becomes the responsibility of the oppressed to “stretch across the gap and educate—in the face of tremendous resistance—as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival” (3). She writes, “This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concerns (3).

The role of the writer/rhetorician then is to take the burden away from leaving the oppressed to educate the oppressor. It becomes our responsibility to use the privilege we have to challenge the exclusive rhetorical canon, and to demand a more inclusive discourse that allows for the stories of marginalized groups to be told by themselves for themselves.

Chapter 4: REFUGEE LITERACIES IN SYRACUSE, NY

The North Side of Syracuse, NY is a mosaic of different ethnicities, nationalities, languages, and literacies. In the community literacies mentioned above, language—aside from certain situations in La Casita—was not too large of an obstacle. Even in La Casita, the only other language spoken was Spanish, and it was able to be amended by finding Spanish facilitators who would bridge the cultural gaps to work with participants to define new literacies and work towards social change. It becomes much harder in environments like the Northside, where there is no one predominant language, and it is harder to create public community spaces that are accessible to all residents. It also becomes increasingly harder to find a way to circulate narratives outside of the Northside community to resist the hegemonic, mainstream narrative that is frequently used to talk about and not talk to the refugee population.

Literacy Amongst Refugee Populations

Much of the scholarship surrounding literacy in refugee populations focuses on the pursuit of English language skills in communities. While individual voices of refugees is highlighted in documentaries and in creative nonfiction, academic literature tends to focus on the perspective of the researcher and the researcher's interaction with the refugee populations that they are studying. In that context, the refugee body becomes an aspect of study, and, to quote Sarah Ahmed again, the refugee becomes a "disembodied object".

It should come as no surprise then that much of the scholarship surrounding refugee communities focuses on how a non-refugee teacher may be able to improve English language learning skills amongst their students, or on observations of researchers when engaging with refugee populations. Mainstream rhetoric provides images of refugee people in states of constant suffering, helplessness and misery. This rhetoric not only serves to diminish the complexity of identities involved in the refugee experience, but it also portrays the West as a “savior” that aids those in need.

In her dissertation, *Translocal digital authoring: Identity negotiation processes through multimodal literacies among girls who were resettled as refugees from Thailand*, Delila Omerbasic focuses on how refugee women and girls are solely labeled as “victims” in academic literature, “without an engagement of their own tellings of their experiences” (Omerbasic 42). Refugee women and girls are particularly addressed by their situation: they are defined by their limited access to education, health care, and their exposure to gender violence and poverty. Omerbasic discusses how this narrative is then translated to programs being offered towards refugee resettlement, and specifically refugee literacy programs, where upon entering a schooling system refugee children are treated as “objects of correction and remediation” (Campano 54).

Refugees that come from a background of the oral tradition are faced with additional obstacles. In the paper, “The use of literacy events in the workplace by refugees of Hmong heritage coming from an oral tradition”, Bella M. Hanson speaks of the predominant theories amongst Western academics and psychologists where “individuals from an oral society have a pre-logical mentality and inferior cognition” (Hanson, 2003, pg 51). While she asserts that this

has recently become an “unpopular” theory, she nevertheless continues to refer to the oral tradition as “pre-literate”, and makes the distinction between “literate” and “oral tradition”. Shirley B. Heath, “Ways with Words: Language, Life and Communities and Classrooms”, defines a “literacy event” as “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants; interactions and their interpretive processes” (Heath, 1982, pg 93); therefore, concluding that her definition of the “literacy” is one perpetuated by the Western canon.

The repercussions for this rhetoric are seen in the school system. Dr Christopher Vang, who has also studied Hmong-American students, found “family responsibilities and obligations do somewhat affect school grades and interfere with their educational pursuits” (Vang 7). He took note that it was apparent that many Hmong parents are “culturally stagnant” and not acculturating at the same rate as their children, and thus a gap continues to keep growing between the two generations as the children become more Americanized and the parents fall back on their traditions. However, Vang notes the additional obstacles of a racist schooling system that Hmong students have had to overcome. When they first arrived in America, it was assumed by teachers and public administrators that Hmong students were not college-bound and were put on high school tracks that only allowed them to finish the minimum requirements to graduate (Vang 58).

The term “culturally stagnant” rings bells back to a colonial age where the West enforced their “superior” culture and lifestyle onto other communities.

In addition, *The Literacy Myth*, is deeply imbedded in any mainstream discussion surrounding literacy amongst refugee populations. Hanson asserts, “Regardless of their background, refugees... needed to be literate in English to function well in the American workplace” (56). Indeed, in a study conducted by Howard Berkson “Labor--force participation”,

found that “individuals with an “English deficiency” were about half as likely to participate in the labor force as those without the deficiency”(15). Much of the programs centered around refugee resettlement focus on teaching and prescribing Western literacy methods, as it can be the quickest way to assist newcomers in finding jobs. However, in pursuit of this, often times refugees are asked to leave behind their native culture and history. Refugee students are given few opportunities to be able to voice their own experiences. They are marked as the “Other”, whose narrative is shaped for them-- and whose “identities, agency, and knowledge are *refused*” (Omerbasic 3). It is in this way that their communities and identities are allowed to be manipulated and misrepresented in the exclusive Western canon, and this is why the American public forms negative and untruthful opinions on refugee existence.

Analysis of the Rhetoric Used to Discuss Refugee Populations by the Post Standard

It is important to analyze how mainstream media has shaped the rhetoric surrounding refugee lives in the Northside of Syracuse, NY. We already have discussed the coverage of Republican Representative Wendy Long, but it is imperative that we also examine how other articles have worked to shape the public rhetoric surrounding refugees.

The Post Standard is a major media publication throughout the Syracuse area. It’s website “Syracuse.com” attracts on average “more than a quarter of a million people”, and in 2014 it was ranked the number 1 newspaper website in America by the Scarborough research company (Linhorst 1). The Post Standard has institutional influence and power. It has a great deal of access and privilege in the rhetorical sphere, and it has a history of misrepresenting the refugee populations in Syracuse, NY.

There are two main methods of discourse surrounding refugee communities in Syracuse.com: trauma and economic means.

In an article entitled “Refugees in Syracuse, Benefit or Burden? Here’s What the Numbers Say”, Chris Baker writes about the correlation between an increasing refugee population in the Northside and poverty in the neighborhood. He also proceeds to define refugee lives as “benefits” or “burdens” through quantitative economic measures, thus more or less placing a price tag on refugee lives. His rhetoric is also American-centered, he does not consider refugees to be part of the “Syracuse community”—he is far more concerned on whether or not other Syracusans are benefiting from the presence of refugees. As a result, his article perpetuates a predominant rhetoric in immigration policy that justifies denying refugees homes and sanctuaries through the excuse of financial security.

We see similar patterns in a similar Syracuse.com article entitled, “Taxpayers pay as refugees flee hellish foreign camps to find a dump in Syracuse”. Although the article itself does advocate for better living conditions for refugee populations, and places the responsibility of terrible housing on irresponsible landlords and a malfunctioning resettlement system rather than on refugees themselves—the title of the article and the line “U.S. taxpayers are footing the bill, paying thousands of dollars in rent each month to owners who haven’t consistently paid water bills, maintained the property or provided adequate security” (Dowty para 3). Once again, refugee lives are treated as economic exchange. The call to action is not one rooted in fighting for the preservation of dignity and safety of refugee lives, but is upholding tax dollars as the most critical issue needed to be addressed.

Trauma is a double-edged sword in the discourse surrounding refugee populations. On one hand, it is important to acknowledge the mental stress and displacement that comes with

being forced to leave a homeland and have little control in where one is able to find stable housing. On the other hand, trauma frequently becomes the single-narrative in the discourse surrounding refugee populations. When writers refer to refugees as “helpless masses”, “overwhelmed” and “fleeing violence”, it is clear that they do not see beyond the immediate needs of the refugees, nor are they attempting to provide agency to refugee narratives. As literary analyst Caren Caplan writes in *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*, “This passive characterization as the image of stagnating people imprisoned within camps not only present refugees as powerless, but also as frozen, forever linked to their forced displacement” (237).

Since the 2016 Presidential Election, Syracuse.com has been flooded with stories of refugees faced with overwhelming adversity and terror, trying to survive in the Trump administration. One such article, “Survival School: How Syracuse refugees overcome language barriers, cultural shock and trauma with help from their neighbors”, cites the testimony of an American woman who speaks of an Iraqi refugee she once met, “The woman’s husband told me she was so unhappy and would cry every day. She wanted to go home” (Mintz para 10). This same article also focused on discussing the achievements of Hope Print—a non-profit in the North Side founded by white Americans to assist with refugee resettlement. Syracuse.com, if ever talking about achievements of refugees is often quick to associate these achievements with an American-run non-profit like Hope Print and Interfaith Works. Kaplan associates this connection with elitist assumptions that are frequently made to silence the “dumb refugee” and uphold the “bourgeois modernist” (121).

In analyzing articles written on refugees, it is clear that there is a deep gap in the public sphere surrounding refugee communities. While refugees are constantly being examined, talked

about, justified, “advocated” for, ignored, they are never given the space and the opportunity to shape their own narratives for themselves. It becomes obvious why individuals like Wendy Long feel the need to draw on public misconceptions of refugee populations by perpetuating racist rhetoric of the North Side of Syracuse, NY. It is a similar rhetoric that we would have seen happening of the residents in the 15th Ward—who were labeled as “slum dwellers”, and who were impacted by policies that lead to their displacement and oppression. We can already see the consequences of hateful and racist rhetoric surrounding refugee populations through the election of Donald Trump, and the implementation of the infamous “travel ban”. Locally in Syracuse, programs like Interfaith Works—a major refugee resettlement nonprofit—is experiencing an enormous cut in budget, and many refugee communities must live with the burden of knowing that many of their loved ones who live in countries like Syria and Algeria will not be with them anytime soon, while also dealing with the anxieties of questioning their own futures in America.

Non-Profits in Syracuse

There are many nonprofit organizations that exist in the North Side of Syracuse that cater towards a refugee population. Organizations like Interfaith Works tend to be focused on resettlement issues, and typically only work with refugee populations for the first 90 days that they enter into Syracuse, NY. The theory is that organizations like Hope Print and North Side Learning Center take over after that—and as well intentioned as these organizations are, their focus is mostly on teaching English language, passing citizenship tests, and “Americanizing” refugee communities. These are not spaces that advocate for the continuation and survival of the culture, histories, and literacies that refugees are contextualized within. Instead, too often, refugees might find themselves subject to discrimination in spaces that idolize English and advocate for assimilation to Western culture.

Students from Syracuse University are frequently sent to the North Side Learning Center to conduct ethnographies and research project on the population that they are interviewing. Arva Hasonjee, a Syracuse University volunteer at the North Side Learning Center, spoke of the insensitive questions that were often posed to members in the North Side Learning Center. Questions that often asked about trauma and family history, boxing the story of a life to include only displacement and violence.

“A lot of people don’t want to talk to anyone anymore,” Arva told me. “I think it stems from racism experienced in schools. They can feel themselves being examined, and they don’t want to talk to someone who is going to write about them like an object” (Arva Hasonjee, personal communication, February 28th, 2017).

Indeed, in a candle light vigil session for the civilians stranded in Aleppo, Syria on December 14th, 2016, a group of Syrian refugees expressed sentiments of living in the Syracuse community and struggling with Syrian identity. They were free to speak in their mother tongue, Arabic, and a University Professor acted as a translator to English for the other people in the room.

“The Syrian people have become equated with violence,” one man said. “The only images you ever see of us are in terror and violence. We as a people are not like that. Syrians are kind and loving. We are for the community—there is no story of me and my family living peacefully in our neighborhoods.”

“My children go to a public school in Syracuse. There is no free busing if you live within a certain area. But I don’t have a car. We have to walk miles every morning, sometimes in the freezing cold—unsafe for the children.”

“The teachers here assume things about my son,” another person said. “They assume that he is educationally impaired. He is a smart boy, he just doesn’t feel comfortable in that classroom.”

Storytelling and Social Justice in Refugee Literacies

I want to make it avidly clear that, as in all marginalized communities, community literacies exist and thrive outside of the gaze of white supremacist institutions. There are refugee communities that come together to share stories, community organize, advocate for change, and heal together. However, it is important that refugee communities have access to English language learning. As social justice activists and immigrant women, Ujju Aggarwal, Priscilla Gonzalez, Donna Nevel, and Perla Placencia wrote in “Women Creating Change: The Center for Immigrant Families’ English Literacy Project”, For many of us, English language literacy skills mean having a tool to defend ourselves and greater confidence and independence as women. It also means access to jobs, being able to help our children with their homework, and enabling communication and building with people and groups from different communities” (Aggarwa et al. 4).

It is imperative then that non-profits like the North Side Learning Center and Hope Print commit to a form of English Language Learning that does not dismiss the mother tongues and literacies of refugee communities. As Franz Fanon wrote, “Every colonized people—in other words every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation...” (Fanon 18).

In 2002, there existed a project called the “Center for Immigrant Families’ English Literacy Project”, a program that was run by (mostly immigrant) women of color and catered to

a demographic of poor and working class women of color, refugees and immigrants included, in New York City. At CIF, English language learning was taught, but there was also a push to “promote the value and sustenance of our own languages, our mother tongues, and cultures. It is in our mother tongues that we convey our deepest sentiments and selves. Our own languages are the expressions of our hearts, our families, our memories, and the legacies which we want our children to be proud. Learning English in this context, we locate the language as a tool of resistance and sometimes, of survival, one that has also a particular use-value for us” (Aggarwal et al. 4).

The Center for Immigrant Families took on a social justice approach to their English language learning and in a “communal storytelling approach” so as to ensure that learning English does not have to mean forgetting pieces of history and culture.

In the English Language workshops conducted by the CIF, there were “Mother tongue sessions”, where participants would tell their stories in their own language. Facilitators spoke of the dangers of requiring that this language be spoken in English, “Requiring that these stories be spoken in English can make it too difficult to share many of our experiences or it can make us feel compelled to change how they are told, feeling pressured to be telling the story of our successful assimilation in American society” (9). English language sessions are conducted after mother tongue sessions, where “we build upon the emotional experiences that have been shared without self-consciousness as begin to build vocabulary and sentence structure in our writing and speaking” (10).

It is important to acknowledge that when community storytelling is forced to be told in English, an important and essential piece of the narrative is silenced. The full story is not able to be told. For this reason, narratives that focus on “successful” refugees that have been able to

assimilate to American culture and language also work to uphold hegemonic, Western society as a superior way of life.

In her article to the Guardian, “The Ungrateful Refugee: ‘We have no debt to repay’”, Dina Nayeri speaks of the double standard that refugee people often have to live with, “The refugee has to be less capable than the native, needier; he must stay in his place. That’s the only way gratitude will be accepted. Once he escapes control, he confirms his identity as the devil... You’re not enough until you’re too much. You’re lazy until you’re a greedy interloper” (Nayeri, 2017).

Conclusion

The Role of the Writer

The Rhetorical Tradition that upholds and legitimizes the Western Canon continues to exist because writers and rhetoricians continue to adhere to it. We do not challenge its existence, and its presence goes un-critiqued in classrooms. What role can we, as writers and compositionists, play then in bringing in other traditions, and giving a platform for other narratives to exist in the rhetorical sphere?

Powell writes of the writer’s ability to “reimagine ourselves, our pedagogies, our scholarship, our discipline in relation to a long and sordid history of American imperialism” (Powell 428). The writer must acknowledge their privilege in serving as a “translator” that can access the exclusive rhetorical sphere, and contribute in shaping or perpetuating discourse through it.

In *White Guys Who Send My Uncle to Prison*, Ben Keubrich writes of the responsibility of the writer to dismantle the racist narratives and rhetoric that allow for injustice to take place upon marginalized groups:

“To counter these narratives will require developing an analysis that is not separate from a critical view of history and an understanding of power relations. And we will need to think about our roles as not just writing or teaching about social movements but directly supporting, joining, and building them” (Kuebrich1).

Keubrich himself worked directly with a community publication about policing in the Syracuse Westside that involved collecting the stories of community members and their (often unpleasant) interactions with the Syracuse Police Department. The result was a publication that was easily circulated within the community, and one that was able to circulate out of the community as well. Thus, allowing the single-narrative of “bad guy vs cop” to be disrupted, and for the residents of the West Side neighborhood to be framed as agencies of their own stories and identities who did not deserve to feel fearful in their own neighborhood.

As Michelle Hall Kells writes in, *What’s Writing Got to Do with It?: Citizen Wisdom, Civil Rights Activism, and 21st Century Community Literacy*”, “giving voice to the personal realities of marginalized citizens represents the first step to promoting social change” (102). The writer may serve as a median to spread the message. A “translator” that does not impose on a community literacy, but rather finds a way to spread the message so as to change how mainstream media begins to discuss the topic. It is critical, then, that the writer centralize their work around the oppressed group, and not speak for them-- but hold the hegemonic institution accountable for their oppression upon a group.

Final Reflection

There is one piece of Dina Nayer’s article, “The Ungrateful Refugee: ‘We have no debt to repay’”, that resonated with me more deeply than any other scholarly literature I had come across in my research:

“But what America did was a basic human obligation. It is the obligation of every person born in a safer room to open the door when someone in danger knocks. It is your duty to answer us, even if we don’t give you sugary success stories. Even if we remain a bunch of ordinary Iranians, sometimes bitter or confused. Even if the country gets overcrowded and you have to give up your luxuries, and we set up ugly little lives around the corner, marring your view. If we need a lot of help and local services, if your taxes rise and your street begins to look and feel strange and everything smells like turmeric and tamarind paste, and your favourite shop is replaced by a halal butcher, your schoolyard chatter becoming ching-chongese and phlegmy “kh”s and “gh”s, and even if, after all that, we don’t spend the rest of our days in grateful ecstasy, atoning for our need”(Nayeri 2).

I have learned a lot through the pursuit of this project. My original plan was to ensure that voices of marginalized communities were being projected so as to dismantle racist and incorrect representations of them in the public sphere. However, I now am more of the opinion that it is not the burden of marginalized communities to have to educate a white audience on why their lives are important. This passage was unapologetically honest, refusing to sympathize with any “assimilation” rhetoric that is so prevalent in refugee discourse.

Upon reading it, realizing that it was an Iranian woman who had written this (and one who was displaced at the same time my parents were), I was quick to forward the article to my mother, intending to finally start a conversation on resisting hegemonic, oppressive Western rhetoric.

“Neds,” she wrote back. “There is a joke about people from Isfahan (a city in Iran), so it goes: the fellow went to the suburbs for a night in nature. He was asked in the morning how was

it? He said: there was so much noise from the sparrows and such stench from the roses, and the hum from the flowing water was so loud that I could not sleep.

I think this describes this lady's basic attitudes to life. She should not be grateful to be any person; she should be grateful to life for whatever chances she has had. I think she is negative and simple-minded in dealing with adversity. She never had any fight in her and became and remained a victim."

I was immediately flooded with shame and anger. I was angry at my mother for not being critical of institutions that had projected racist intent upon her since she had arrived in the West, and ashamed that I had assumed that she as an Iranian refugee would be happy about the project that I was attempting to advocate for.

My mother's relationship with her past as a refugee is complicated and impenetrable. I have to frequently remind myself that I can never equate my own experiences as a first generation Canadian citizen, with two parents who were Iranian refugees, to the experiences of my mother as someone who lived with the identity of refugee on her flesh for years. My work is dedicated to her, but by assuming that she will always agree with the narratives and ideologies that I take on surrounding the refugee discourse, I am falling into the trap of assuming that she should be "grateful" for my attempts.

It was a hard but important lessons about the work that we as social justice agents have committed ourselves to: it is not about us. The work that we do as writers and researchers in fighting injustice is never going to be perfect. There will be moments where we have gotten it wrong—where we have not checked our privilege, where we have silenced voices that we are trying to uplift, where we have mistaken theory and academic training for experience in the flesh. The worst thing that we can do is take it personally and give up. Instead, we need to buckle

down and “own up” to recognizing the diversity and complexity of views, ideas, identities, and ideologies in marginalized literacies.

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