As I write this introduction to our May 2014 issue, it is just becoming fall here in Illinois. As you read this issue in your homes, offices, and other readerly settings, in contrast, the weather should be in the latter throes of spring. Mindful of how that spring spirit may be inhabiting your reading experience, I offer three articles: each celebrates, in its own way, the ongoing and renewing processes of circulating texts—overturning assumptions about writers and writing positionalities—and also studies writing itself as a social practice as well as an intellectual or academic endeavor. Let me say just a bit about how I see these common threads—which feel spring-like in their attempt at rebirthing or reimagining studies of writing and writers—running through our three rich, and I think groundbreaking, articles featured in this issue.

Two questions seem to guide each of our May articles, in whole or in part: Where does writing get circulated? And how do we determine where and when our students, as well as other community members, become “writers”? Actually, become could also go in quotes there, because that age-old question of writers’ development is front and center in all three pieces, but is particularly prominent in Alicia Brazeau’s archival look at late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American farmer literacies, and publications by farmers. As Brazeau—our Emerging Voices featured author for this issue—argues, “Agricultural journals represent literacy artifacts that were both local and public, that brought together many different kinds of writers—editors, men and women as readers, and even children—but that overtly sought to influence the writing practices and personas of their audiences” (399). Brazeau’s study highlights how the literacy practices found in these agricultural journals indicates a purpose to educate their readerships “not only on farming, but also on domestic, government, and social matters” (400); as a result, these journals “argued for pedagogies and writing styles that valued the experiences and habits of rural readers [. . . .] Agricultural journals such as Maine and Ohio certainly sought to encourage participation, but also maintained a very specific vision of how contributors would write and participate,
and in this way limited the options available to writers [. . . ] [even as they] sought to empower writers and practices they believed were distinctly rural or agricultural” (402). Brazeau’s study thus gives us a very different way of looking at defining and shaping writers outside the academy—and within the spaces of a publication type that very few scholars have heretofore engaged with regarding literacy practices, even in the context of Anne Ruggles Gere’s “extracurriculum,” as Brazeau herself notes. Brazeau’s study—which positions these writers as “teachers in a professional community” of farmers and farming practices (397)—thus challenges what it means to circulate writing (what is gained, what is possibly lost), and what it further means to call someone a “writer” while working within the confines of a setting that sees writing as both a necessary utility for passing down information for life and survival, as well as a tool for imparting wisdom that would, theoretically, be far less likely to be memorialized via face-to-face settings.

A further quandary set forth by our authors in this issue may follow from here, in terms of writing as professional utility versus writing as social, dialogic practice: in what ways is writing still viewed as either a social practice or an academic or intellectual endeavor—including the ways in which this dichotomy plays out in pedagogies such as Writing To Learn, writing across the curriculum (WAC), and writing in the disciplines (WID)? Linda Adler-Kassner, in her interrogation of current proposed and enacted reforms to general education at the K–12 through college level, queries whether historical views of general education programs, which “sought to balance the liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinarity” in tension with one another, are now lost to a desire to resolve that very tension too tidily, as initiatives such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) portray this tension “as dysfunctional in contemporary educational reform” (438). Key to this tension, according to Adler-Kassner, is the question of whether college students are meant to be liberal thinkers (in the sense of liberal studies) or preprofessional career seekers. Arguing that a reimagined general education curricula can and should accomplish both, to some degree, Adler-Kassner acknowledges the real possibility that such standardized measures could lead to “erasure of writing as a discipline” (448) within strategically minded testing paradigms. As a response to this, she advocates for framing general education as “Introduction to Communities of Practice,” which “places the explicit development of learners’ abilities to identify, describe, and participate in boundaries around communities of practice at the center of a GE curriculum” (451). Such a reframing, in her argument, “carves a new and potentially distinctive role for disciplinarity and the relationships between threshold concepts and knowledge capabilities within, across, and among academic disciplines and sites outside of the academy” (453).

Just as Adler-Kassner promotes communities of practice as a way of rebooting general education against sweeping nationwide reforms that would otherwise promote a divide-and-conquer approach in contrast, so too does William Duffy
argue for a new way that scholars of writing and rhetoric might view collaboration against the typical theories rehearsed by rhetoric and composition scholars, and in the new context of object-oriented theory. Duffy’s article, as well as Brazeau’s and Adler-Kassner’s, seeks to overturn what I personally see as an institutional myth supported by cultural biases of the absolute value of the group over the individual (in writing and in other social acts). Duffy calls attention to how little collaborative theory has been deeply interrogated, noting that, given the widespread acceptance of collaborative writing as a practice in rhetoric and composition studies, “As a critical term in writing studies, collaboration has consequently assumed a catchall status that allows theorists and practitioners to deploy it in decidedly uncritical ways. To call something ‘collaborative’ is tantamount to saying nothing particular at all, except perhaps that two or more people have worked together in some capacity” (417).

As a response to this problem—I daresay this baseline myth of the field supported by cultural mythology regarding the overarching power of groups (and “teams,” of course, in the business world)—Duffy offers an alternative definition of collaboration, which he labels as object-oriented: a “mutual intervention and progressive interaction with objects of discourse” (418). The most locally compelling, perhaps, in terms of cross-pollination in this particular issue of CE, is Duffy’s example of the collaborative writing model used for developing the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing document, which has been profiled in this journal previously, and which was coauthored by a team of scholars that included Adler-Kassner, one of our current issue’s authors. Building on theories posed by Thomas Kent, Bruno Latour, and others, Duffy ultimately posits a challenge to readers when he observes that “no two instances of collaboration can ever be identical because the discourse collaborators produce, like all discourse in the world, is the product of triangulation. But this does not mean collaborators shouldn’t learn to respond to their interaction,” because there is “generative value in fostering space to interrogate particular moments of resistance when triangulation seemingly fails. How else are we to invent new and better discourse?” (430).

Finally, to close out this issue, we have a thoughtful and thought-provoking review essay by Deborah Holdstein, in which she discusses three newly published books, by David Bleich, Rebecca Nowacek, and John Gage, that are also intertwined in their approaches and viewpoints. As Holdstein notes, the texts she profiles—like the articles in this issue—have in common three main interests and arguments: “first, the reminder that good theory undergirds good practice; second, the often-too-unimplemented truth that rhetoric, history, and composition practice must be intertwined, and actively so; and, third, that the ongoing project of defining a ‘field’ in composition studies must critically engage important and often contested narratives of genre, language, and privilege” (458). I hope you enjoy this review essay, and the rest of our fantastic issue, and that you continue—as readers and potential contributors—to keep College English a vibrant, go-to site for such observations, debates, and productive scholarly challenges to both theory and practice.