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From the Editor

Kelly Ritter

In this issue, we bring you three perspectives on how writing and literacy are appropriated by forces within our academic culture. Starting with Michael MacDonald’s analysis of the narratives of the Lost Boys of Sudan, then moving to Paul Feigenbaum’s proposal for a Rhetoric Project akin to the existing Algebra Project, and concluding with Bruce Horner’s examination of the various positive and negative identities of composition as a course and—by extension—a discipline, this issue illustrates some of the very different ways we might think about literacy learning, and the role of English studies in that learning, in the United States and beyond. Adding further dimension and currency to these featured pieces is a review essay by Amy Wan of three recent titles on literacy, democracy, and learning.

I was very pleased to bring these pieces together under the roof of one issue, not just because I am personally invested in current and past approaches to literacy instruction, but also because these essays call attention to the ways writing as an activity, a marker of identity, and a discipline are surprisingly fluid—and not always to beneficial ends. Our Emerging Voices feature—an inclusion I’m happy to have here, as it’s been a while since we’ve had a first-time author in our pages, so our EV feature has gone dormant for a time, regrettably—is one that examines a recent phenomenon in nonfiction literature, one that was the focus in 2008 of the All-Campus Read for students in first-year writing on my previous campus. Michael MacDonald explores the genre of “Lost Boys” texts using Deborah Brandt’s well-known concept of literacy sponsorship, but proposes a new employment of this concept via his term literacy emissary. MacDonald explains that the idea of a literary emissary “draw[s] attention to the complex ways in which those who are sponsored actively participate in the competing economies of literacy sponsorship” (407–08). This is because literacy emissaries are “not passive objects of either aid or literacy, but instead are active contributors to their own education through a diversity of rhetorical strategies as they communicate the stakes of their own literacy learning to a complex network of audiences.” (408). McDonald further argues that sponsorship itself leads to appropria-
tion in these narratives, because “in stories about the Lost Boys of Sudan, the will to transform the Other is rarely questioned” (412). As a WPA helping to oversee that 2008 All-Campus Read, I had noticed this uncomfortable balance between reading about and appreciating the literacy experiences of the Lost Boys (our campus book was Ismael Beah’s *Long Way Gone*) but also feeling conflicted about what students should *do* with these narratives—or, more specifically, what kinds of relationships they were made to feel were legitimate versus illegitimate regarding the texts and the young men profiled within them.

So, I’m pleased to bring MacDonald’s analysis of some of the other titles in this genre to our pages for further discussion and reconsideration, particularly as doing so allows us to see sponsorship in a manner that might provide more agency for the subjects who are in various stages of becoming literate (in the context—also complicated—of how *we*, those identifying with the sponsors, define this term). As MacDonald notes near the conclusion of his essay,

> So much emphasis is placed on transforming students, but greater attention should be paid to the values and beliefs of sponsors. Refugees who have been resettled in the United States are inundated with cultural orientation programs, yet sponsors receive little training in cross-cultural communication when entering refugee communities. Often, we unnecessarily shift our pedagogical approach in a way that actually oversimplifies the needs and abilities of the populations we imagine ourselves to be working with [. . .] What do we envision when we think about the transformative potential of literacy? And, when we describe that potential, what do we assume about the objective of that transformation? (420)

Next, we have a more unusual contribution—and one that I admire for exactly that notable difference, at least in comparison with more typical CE features that work within the confines of English studies only. This is Feigenbaum’s exploration of what he terms the Rhetoric Project, modeled on an existing endeavor, the Algebra Project, and piloted in his home state of Florida. Feigenbaum’s quest for a stronger relationship between alphabetic and numeric literacy explicitly recalls Joanna Wolfe’s fine *CCC* article from 2010 on “Rhetorical Numbers,” and also echoes the coauthored article by Betsy Bowen and Kathryn Nantz regarding economic stakes of the GED featured in our own September 2014 issue. Feigenbaum, Wolfe, and Bowen and Nantz all recognize the need for literacy learning to move beyond traditional models and single disciplinary formations in order to create a fuller picture of students’ actual, total practices and the cultural constraints that shape them.¹

It has also occurred to me on many occasions that we in English studies, and particularly first-year writing, need stronger alliances between what we do and what teachers in other core subjects, such as first-year mathematics, also do. This is what Feigenbaum’s essay attempts to achieve. As he notes early in his argument, he wants to “consider [. . .] how English studies teachers and scholars can fight for the peda-
gogies they want in partnership with like-minded colleagues in mathematics. After all, mathematics is perhaps the only discipline in American higher education other than rhetoric and composition that people outside the field consistently frame as a service discipline” (426). But further, Feigenbaum seeks to create a partnership that is rooted in social justice initiatives, specifically through modeling a Rhetoric Project on Robert Moses’s Algebra Project, started in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which itself has been working to “[abolish] passive, rigid, drill-based teaching methods that are habitually inflicted on students from this same demographic and [establish] flexible, inquiry-based praxes that invite student ownership of their learning; and [equalize] funding between inner-city schools and their suburban counterparts” (428). An ultimate goal for Feigenbaum is to create “a rhetorical-mathematical education [. . .] to facilitate students’ transformations, not merely into Math Literacy Workers, but into Rhetoric and Math Literacy Workers who can determine for themselves how their voices will enter the public domain,” largely through the capabilities offered in multimedia technologies (436).

Finally, our third featured essay in this issue is by Bruce Horner, who revisits two of what he calls “apocalyptic” example responses to the state of composition in the twenty-first century, as authored by David Smits and Sidney Dobrin. Horner explains that he analyzes “the apocalyptic rhetoric found in [Smits and Dobrin] to help bring into sharp relief the assumptions and moves driving not only their arguments but [also] those deployed in seemingly less apocalyptic, but increasingly pervasive, calls to expand or move beyond or supplement composition in light of its perceived lack—the participation of all such arguments in that same discourse of need” (449). Horner notes the shifting nomenclature of graduate programs as but one example of how the field has enacted this discourse of need, specifically the “[c]alls for composition to somehow merge with or be renamed as writing studies,” which would “appear to align with calls to add rhetoric or multimodal forms of composition to (mere) composition insofar as they seek to add consideration of other kinds of writing to the writing traditionally identified with composition, or insofar as, by giving composition a more traditionally recognizable academic subject matter (content), it will garner composition, now renamed writing studies, more academic institutional respectability” (467).

I must admit that I hear the name for my own graduate program here at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (Writing Studies) in this calling-out, so the challenge about naming intrigues me on a local level. But Horner’s argument is more than just about what we call ourselves; he asks readers to examine what the consequences are of “accept[ing] dominant culture’s limited conceptions and valuations of composition as low, limited, preparatory, illegitimate. Such efforts produce and maintain a ‘discourse of need’ about composition itself, defining it as lacking what dominant culture identifies as legitimate disciplinary characteristics and
therefore as in need of either abandonment or supplement” (469). Horner offers a contrast in approach by authors such as Smit and Dobrin with alternate paradigms presented by other recent scholars (in his argument, the examples of Theresa Lillis and J.K. Gibson-Graham) that would allow us to “acknowledge both the effectivity, on the ground, of dominant representations of composition work (and their officially designated alternatives) and, simultaneously, their inadequacy” (448). To do so would keep us from aligning “with dominant ideological constructions [. . .] that consign composition to mere service to the dominant, or worse” because it is “these constructions, not composition per se, that threaten to keep composition shackled” (470). It is a provocative argument that I’m sure many of our readers will enjoy seeing engaged here, alongside the other two featured essays that more directly outline some additional possibilities for reimagining the use and use-value of writing in our students’ lives.

Rounding out this issue to bring these views to bear on larger K–16 conversations is Wan’s review essay, “Rhetoric, Deliberation, and Democracy in an Era of Standards,” which looks at a trio of recent titles that approach issues of rhetoric, civic discourse, and academic literacy in very different ways. As Wan notes, although none of the titles profiled here is specifically about the nationwide mass curricular revision hovering over many a teacher—the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)—the three books “may help worried educators better negotiate the push toward standards and assessment by reminding us of the democratic and deliberative possibilities our classrooms can be used to model and explore” (477). Examining the arguments posed in books by Nel Noddings, Arabella Lyon, and Brian Jackson and Gregory Clark, Wan rightfully argues that when trying to enact in classrooms something as massive as the CCSS, “the elusive and all-important task is understanding how these grand goals might be put into practice without creating such narrow definitions of activities like literacy that they dissociate other goals such as knowledge making, communication, and democracy” (477).

This lens that Wan employs to read these three texts—with other links between them being the tenets of John Dewey and deliberative rhetorics—provides a useful way for us to think about how current political movements afoot in our schools, those that will impact each of us in some way at the postsecondary level, can and should be actively responded to in and through our ongoing scholarship in rhetoric and composition. As Wan concludes,

This review takes on the assumption that readers of College English believe in democratic practice and the possibility that education can play a role in supporting and cultivating those practices. These three books are a good reminder that education does not have to be focused on competition and achievement, about defining intelligence through academic aptitude, a reminder well served as the Common Core and its impending assessment shape the nature of public education and its goals. (489)
NOTE

1. A notable exception to the usual English-mathematics divide is Professor Patrick Bahls of UNC–Asheville, who is also—at the time of this writing—secretary for the Carolinas chapter of the Council of Writing Program Administrators and author of Student Writing in the Quantitative Disciplines—A Guide for College Faculty (Jossey-Bass, 2012).