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### **Editor’s Introduction: Civic Activism: Community Writing, Practices and Observances to Counter Marginalization**

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A social issue that tears at the social fabric of the United States is the poor treatment of migrants, such as the dehumanization of migrants arriving at our Southern border in political discourse, including those from the Northern Triangle countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. According to a national media release, published by the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol on August 9, 2019, “[i]n July, U.S. Border Patrol apprehended 71,999 individuals on the Southwest border, bringing the total apprehensions on the Southwest border to 760,370 this year” (para. 5). Statistics of apprehensions, including those in this media release, are used in political discourse to create images of large groups of undocumented migrants attempting to enter the US, simultaneously attempting to provoke fear and justify greater restriction of access/movement. At the same time, the extended detention of migrants in overcrowded facilities threatens their physical and emotional wellbeing. In “Border Patrol Detains Adults with No End - Until Lawyers Sue,” Nomaan Merchant of the *Associated Press News* describes a pattern of migrants being transferred out after their attorneys sue on behalf of their clients. Merchant explains, “The lawyers believe the government is trying to avoid a federal judge issuing a sweeping order that would require the release of potentially thousands of people detained by the Border Patrol or changes to improve the conditions in cells that government inspectors and advocates have said are squalid” (para. 6).

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During the summer of 2019, many people were distressed to see images of migrants, including children, held in overcrowded detention centers and at Border Patrol stations as described by Merchant. The Lights for Liberty immigration vigils, held on July 12, 2019, provide example of civic activism in the advocacy for the ending of the wide-scale detention of migrants, including unaccompanied minors. The vigils helped keep the images of the treatment of migrants, including reports by the news media and on social media, in the public consciousness of the United States. Equally important, these reports document the conditions in the facilities, along with the continued wide-scale detention of migrants.

Over the last three years, civic activism and lawsuits have attempted to counter policies informed by stereotypes. For example, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is one organization that fought against President Trump's travel bans in court. After the Supreme Court upheld the Muslim Ban 3.0, the ACLU Washington released the "Statement on Supreme Court Muslim Ban Ruling," which notes that "[l]ike previous versions [of the Muslim ban], this one blocks immigrants and temporary visitors from several Muslim-majority countries" (para.1). The statement also underscores how the travel bans undermine "fundamental values: values such as religious freedom, due process, and equal protection of the law for *everyone* in our country" (para. 4). In January 2019, the Trump Administration included Nigeria as one of six countries for failing to address security concerns in its expanded travel ban. The Nigerian expatriate community in Houston is one of the largest in the US; the expanded travel ban will harm families in Houston by denying visas to family members (Kriel paras. 1-6). The ongoing civic activism of organizations like the ACLU is essential to preserving/restoring democratic values and protecting such vulnerable communities.

Although some readers may believe that such civic activism may not be effective in our current political environment, it is one of many tools that can counter the feelings of exasperation and hopelessness.<sup>1</sup>

The 2019 issue of *Open Words* spotlights civic activism by providing access for the voices and experiences of marginalized communities. Contributors in this issue highlight the importance of access as it relates to literacy, assessment, service-learning, and active reading. These articles express and reflect on forms of activism within the context of educational/community settings.

Michelle Hall Kells, invited contributor and author for our lead article, turns our attention to civic activism in the form of community writing in her article, "Doing Democracy: The Salt of the Earth Recovery Project--Citizen Scholars and Activist Writing Across Communities." The Salt of the Earth Recovery Project came into

fruition through community writing workshops that emphasized “deliberative democratic practice” and the creation of the *Digital Cuentos* archive, providing opportunity for community members to share their experiences and memories of the Empire Zinc Mine strike (8). In addition to using Writing Across Communities as a framework that values the literacies and experiences of local communities, Kells with a group of graduate students, applied Chantal Mouffe’s concept “agonistic pluralism” to create spaces for community members with “adversarial positions” to engage in deliberative dialogue informed by the principles of democracy “and together determine the fate of the historic Local 890 union hall where Mexican American citizens staged one of the most effective labor strikes in U.S. history.”

Of interest is the political activism of members of the Ladies Auxiliary 209, as they held the picket line to counter efforts of a law enforcement injunction that attempted to end the strike by forcing the men of the Local 890 to stop picketing. The strike resisted inequitable wages and resources, such as housing, to Mexican American and Mexican miners, as compared to Anglo American miners. The civic activism in the form of a strike sought to counter the value systems and policies informed by prejudiced, racial belief systems of the 1950s, which in turn influenced the working conditions and life experiences of a marginalized community. The strike, Kells elucidates, called out the institutionalized racism in the US that kept in place workplace inequalities.

The Salt of the Earth Recovery project is an important example of civic activism, which promoted social justice through the process of telling history from a historically marginalized community perspective, thereby bringing the voices and experiences of community members into the spotlight, as described by Kells.

In the next article “Hurricane Rhetorics: An Ontological Analysis of the Recovery and Rebuild of Lone Star College-Kingwood after Harvey,” Cindy Ross explores the issue of access to education, specifically how a natural disaster can affect equitable access to higher education. After her college Lone Star College-Kingwood in Houston flooded during Hurricane Harvey, administrators delayed the fall 2017 semester start date and converted originally planned 16-week courses into 12-week courses, with many of the courses taught online or at temporary locations off campus. Building on her experiences as a faculty member at Lone Star College-Kingwood, Ross uses an object-oriented ontological framework to encourage critical reflection on the ways in which higher education institutions and writing programs can respond to, as well as plan for, rhetorical situations caused by natural disasters.

As a fellow faculty member of Lone Star College-Kingwood, I concur with what Ross describes as the rhetorical exigency initiated by the agency of the

floodwaters. It was also challenging teaching first-year students with limited or no experience learning in online environments. Moreover, many students were attempting to recover from flood damage to their homes and/or were searching for new jobs because their workplaces had flooded. Although I encouraged students to meet with me on campus to discuss their writing, only a handful of students were able to meet regularly. Some students also stopped logging in to my course websites to complete assignments. The ability to convert to an online learning environment only addresses the immediate restriction on access to education after a natural disaster. Ross's article underscores how issues, such as technological literacy levels in the online learning environment, also restrict access to equitable education, creating opportunity to plan to address such issues instead of responding retroactively after a natural disaster.

Marking the two-year anniversary of Hurricane Harvey in August of 2019, the Greater Houston area remains vulnerable to flooding even with flood mitigation projects occurring, including the dredging of the San Jacinto River in the Humble-Kingwood area. This vulnerability creates anxiety, resulting from concern that climate change will continue to increase the intensity of storms and the resultant flooding. Ross provides us a timely article given the effect climate change can have on communities such as Houston, which is situated just above sea level and has a history of flooding partly because of its flat landscape as well as the destruction of prairies and wetlands for commercial and residential development.

Next, in their article "Service-Learning in the Community College Composition Classroom: Lessons Learned from Sustainable Projects at One Community College," Darlene Beaman and Julie Jackson describe the challenges of organizing sustainable service-learning projects informed by the objective of not only creating potential for civic engagement, but also addressing attrition rates. As Beaman and Jackson reveal, faculty fatigue is one issue that restricts the potential for such sustainable service-learning projects. Nevertheless, Beaman and Jackson identify the characteristics of successful and sustainable service-learning projects at the college, one being allowing students to determine how best they can collaborate with community partners.

This issue also features Ronna J. Levy's "Literature Circles: Access to Texts" article, where Levy reflects on the application of Harvey Daniels's methodology for implementing literature circles to facilitate active reading in her community college classrooms. She posits that writing instructors can use the model of the literature circle to teach students the reading process, which she highlights is just as important as teaching the writing process in scaffolding student learning and critical engagement with texts. Levy explains, "literature circle roles encourage students to access the

construction of a range of mental representations in the service of a deeper and more critical understanding of a text.”

Also, the articles by Brandon Erby and Jolivette Mecnas offer new perspectives on how to engage marginalized groups in educational settings. In “Learning is an All Black Thing: Literacy, Pedagogy, and Black Educational Institutions after *Brown v. Board of Education*,” Erby examines the pedagogies used by the Mississippi Freedom Schools and the Nairobi Day Schools to nurture the literacy practices of students, drawing from literacy practices and rhetorical traditions (e.g., call and response) in Black communities. By so doing, he underscores “how the multiple literacy practices found in Black alternative educational spaces after *Brown* strengthened Black lives and communities by *cultivating* the knowledge(s) being *suppressed* in White-controlled schools.” Erby also demonstrates “how Black students were introduced to an organizing tradition in these spaces that merged educational concerns with political activism.” Erby underscores how contemporary writing teachers can learn from the histories of Black educational institutions to design curricula that build on and value the literacy practices and rhetorical traditions of Black students and students of color more broadly. By highlighting the importance of access to curricula that values the literacy practices and rhetorical traditions of Black students and students of color more broadly, Erby seeks to promote equitable learning opportunities in contemporary writing classrooms.

In “Recognizing Institutional Diversity, Supporting Latinx Students: First-Year Writing Placement and Success at a Small Community Four-Year HSI” Mecnas presents the findings of a study on assessment, designed to evaluate how best to “support students’ degree completion by revising FYW,” taking into account “current movements to reform FYW placement and curricula, based on research illustrating the harmful impact of deficit narratives on Latinx students.” Crucial in this article is Mecnas’s finding that the “study may help inform faculty and administrators as to how FYW programs support pathways toward degree completion for Latinx students, and for all students, at private, nonprofit four-year Hispanic-Serving Institutions.”

The final article for our 2019 issue brings us back to our southern border and highlights the interconnectedness of US and Mexican communities. Susan Garza and Gabriel Ferreyra, in “El Parque de la Amistad / Friendship Park,” visually analyze restricted access to Friendship Park, located at the US-Mexico border wall in the San Deigo–Tijuana region. In 1971, First Lady Pat Nixon dedicated Friendship Park; the park is located at monument Number 1, which demarcates the boundary line drawn between the US and Mexico for the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. To learn different perspectives on the issue of access at Friendship Park, Garza and Ferreyra

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interviewed stakeholders, including Border Patrol officers, an immigration lawyer, a geographer, and members of the grassroots organization Friends of Friendship Park. Friends of Friendship Park engages in civic action through its efforts to negotiate with Border Patrol to increase access to Friendship Park for communities on the US side and Mexico side to interact, within the current context of US policies designed to restrict access at the border (e.g., ongoing construction of Border Wall).

In closing, the articles in this issue broaden the concept of access by stressing the interconnectedness of access and civic activism. Fostering opportunities for civic activism to occur through access is especially important to counter ideologies and policies that marginalize vulnerable communities, particularly in the current political environment.

## Endnotes

1. Since the completion of the 2019 issue, the US has experienced extensive instability and change:
  - COVID-19 cases have surged in the US, resulting in the need for a collaborative federal, state, and local effort to reduce the spread of coronavirus to save lives.
  - The killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis was a catalyst for Black Lives Matter demonstrations internationally, underscoring police brutality.
  - On June 15, 2020 the Supreme Court ruled that LGBTQ workers are protected from discrimination against gender status or sexual orientation.
  - On June 18, 2020, the Supreme Court upheld Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), preventing the deportation of DACA recipients.

The instability in the US has underscored racial and social inequities and health inequities.

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### About the Author

**Kristina Gutierrez** is Associate Professor at Lone Star College-Kingwood in Houston, Texas. She earned her PhD in English from The University of Texas at San Antonio, where she specialized in rhetoric and composition and in Latinx cultural studies. Her research interests include visual rhetoric, new materialism, and popular cultural studies. She is currently co-writing an essay on the memorialization of Selena Quintanilla Pérez in Corpus Christi. She has presented at the *Conference on College Composition and Communication*, *National Council of Teachers of English*, and *Rhetoric Society of America*. She had also taught full time at Texas A&M University at College Station and Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.

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