HOSTESSES OF LITERACY: LIBRARIANS, WRITING TEACHERS, WRITING CENTERS, AND A HISTORICAL QUEST FOR ETHOS

In a 1898 issue of Public Libraries, Katherine Sharp, director of one of the first library schools, insisted that library work was the ideal profession for a recent college graduate, reporting that “[a] gentleman of experience was asked what was needful to fit the inquirer for a librarian’s position.” This was a portion of his lengthy reply, which constituted the entire content of Sharp’s article:

This [library work] ought to appeal to the budding ambition of a college senior. . . . It appeals to the legal, medical, domestic, and above all to philanthropic instincts. It is a true profession and so recognized. . . . It now leads to the degree of the Bachelor of Science at the University of the state of New York, and this degree represents as much professional work as a doctor’s or lawyer’s degree, covering two years of technical instruction beyond college work. It is raising instead of lowering the value of degrees, and we are far from the danger predicted by a New York senator that the University would be turning out Bachelors of Hemstitching. (1)

The first question we might ask of this passage is why did Sharp deem it necessary to promote the field of librarianship using a man as her mouthpiece? Sharp’s colleague and mentor, Melvil Dewey, might provide one answer. Dewey, as in Decimal System, established the first school of library science in 1887 at Columbia University, and he helped standardize a role for women within libraries through the first program dedicated to studying library science—particularly because Dewey recruited women for his program. But Dewey wasn’t the only link. The creation of public libraries after the Civil War may also be attributed to women’s burgeoning

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power in the public arena. Turn-of-the-century club women often “approached Carnegie for funding, hounded the community for support, saw to the construction of buildings, the hiring of staff, and the development of collections, and lobbied for adequate budgets” (Malone 282). While some women advocated the library as a place for the transformation of America’s citizens through education, they also saw libraries as a route to intellectual development. As librarians, women could, theoretically, move into the work force without abandoning the role carved out for them by the ideology of separate spheres because the library was associated with the middle-class home (Jenkins 223). Finally, the essentialization of library work as women’s work was also a companion to economic realities. There was a demand for librarians simply due to the growing number of libraries: 3,682 in 1876 and 8,000 in 1900 (Garrison 174). By 1910, 79% of librarians were women (Banner 257).

Sharp’s use of testimony, attesting that library science be distinguished from hemstitching, helps us understand attitudes about women’s work in the nineteenth century. The senator’s alleged comparison between library science and hemstitching, which contrasts with Sharp’s position about the worth of a library degree, is partially apt. Library work became viable for women at the turn of the century—work deemed “suitable” for them—just as sewing had been practically the only occupation available for women who needed to work outside the home in the nineteenth century, before the industrial revolution made more diverse factory work available to them (Baron and Klepp 24). Sewing was not considered a skill but rather something that women could do “naturally” because they were women and learned it at home. Hemstitching in particular—finish work, so-called—would have been regarded differently from more prestigious tasks of sewing like dress design, reserved for male tailors. Thus, by promoting the distinction between library work and hemstitching, Sharp negotiated prejudice regarding women’s work, recognizing the lack of skill often associated with it.

I share Sharp’s rhetorical positioning regarding library work, not as a mere history lesson, but to suggest its application to current and historical issues in our field of composition, particularly regarding its method for establishing ethos. Those of us who teach writing, and who work in writing centers, can no doubt appreciate Sharp’s rhetorical position: promoting her field, and the education of its practitioners, conscious that it might not be understood or valued by the world at large or at the least the world that was looking. In this article, I’d like to both critique and advance an understanding for this method of establishing ethos—promoting one’s field by distinguishing it from work associated with women. First, I provide some reasons why this might have been important to women librarians and
later will argue how this process applies to particular exigencies in the field of library science and our own field today. The term *hostess* in the title of my article denotes the labor problems that have unfortunately and predictably followed service work within these two professions: library science and composition. It also refers to the gendered nature of this work and its consequentially low status in a capitalistic economy.

**HOSTING LITERACY AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY**

Because library science became dominated by women, and because essentialist thinking deemed women’s work inferior to men’s, at the outset, female librarians made less money than their male counterparts and library work paid poorly in general. Professionalization, made possible by burgeoning library schools like the one founded by Dewey, proved initially to be a mixed blessing for women librarians. First, it was harder in the beginning to distinguish between those trained in school and those trained on the job. Later, the fact that a librarian was not trained professionally became an excuse to pay her less. Notes from a meeting among women librarians in 1892, published in the *Library Journal*, indicates that women librarians were aware that the essentialization of women’s roles based on their identified feminine traits contributed to their being paid less than men. According to their statistics, wages varied widely for women librarians. The 15 highest wages paid to women in the field averaged $1,090 but “[t]he 24 men filling similar positions receive[d] an average salary of [$]1,450” (Cutler 90). Women without degrees or administrative status could expect to make $300 to $500 a year. The women synthesized a field-wide cognizance of their wage problem, suggesting that pay inequities were related to sexism as well as to their own willingness to accept low pay. They theorized that salaries were lowered by several factors including “the fact that working among books is considered ‘gentle’ employment, without the severe strain of teaching” and “[b]ecause many other library trustees take advantage of woman’s willingness to work for less than she knows her work is useful” (Cutler 90). This meeting also reflects the growing gulf between those librarians deemed “professionals,” and thus paid accordingly, and those marked as practitioners, who were paid much less.

This report from 1892 has an eerily modern tone. Twenty years later some librarians’ wages were increased, but the structure of the profession shifted so that by 1930 men took over many of the academic positions in library work (Maack 108) previously held by women like Katherine Sharp. That women’s articulation and evidence of their equality with men most likely fell on mute ears, and that nineteenth-century idealism traveled comfortably into the twentieth century, is evident in a speech made by Herbert Putnam, the Librarian of Congress, to a graduating class of women
at Simmons’ College in 1912. Putnam, admitting that women’s increased presence in the work force had made it creditable “that they should,” work in the public sphere (651), also warned his female audience that when entering the job market they would be met with obstacles. Their struggle for assimilation would be grounded in fundamental differences between males and females. According to Putnam, “The relative inability to generalize [among women] is due to an absorption in the particular, which means a devotion which is in itself a virtue; the lack of sense of proportion which causes her to exaggerate the significance of the trivial, is due to a similar absorption and devotion” (654). From his speech one can imagine a correlative argument, that women were best suited for the attention to detail required of the more clerical tasks of library work because of their “absorption” with and devotion to “particulars.” Economist Julie Matthaei claims that sentiments like Putnam’s were indicative of the overall threat that women workers posed to the male dominated society at the turn of the century, making it impossible for female librarians to transcend the economic frustrations like those voiced at the Women’s Meeting in 1892 (208-209).

While dominant ideology paid constant lip service to women’s subordination, the espoused separation between women’s work at home and men’s work in the public arena was challenged in reality by women crossing thresholds into the world of work. The autonomy available to professional women librarians during this epoch is evident simply in the amount of writing published by them in the field’s several journals. An article by a children’s librarian, Caroline Hewins, published in The Library Journal in 1914, indicates the access these women had to public text-making and the power they had in their librarian positions. This narrative also violates the image of the librarian as a moral conservative pushing her tastes upon reluctant clients. In her article, Hewins describes how she single-handedly built a children’s library, which she developed through dialogue with the children in her Hartford, Connecticut community. Her job entailed public relations, consulting with high school English teachers about book selection and fund-raising at both the local and state level. Hewins’ strategies for arousing public interest were particularly creative. One of her ideas was to publish a letter in the community newspaper written especially to children—inviting them to book talks (99). A survey of librarians—male and female alike—published in the same journal, the same year, suggests an overall optimism in the field about job prospects. Since 1899, average salaries among professional librarians had increased from $686 a year to $1081 a year (Rathborne 190), a salary that was not much lower than that paid to a college instructor a few years earlier (Stricker 237). Vice President of the Pratt Institute School of Library Science, Josephine Rathborne, a

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compiler of the survey’s results, considered this information about salaries to be “indicative of a general upward tendency in the profession at large toward better conditions of work and more adequate pay” (190).

While women librarians lost power as leaders in academia as the twentieth century progressed, they continued to be welcomed as leaders in community libraries where, as Hewins’ described duties might indicate, they had autonomy over the development and scope of their work. Unfortunately, these libraries were hurt during the Depression when civic budgets were cut. Women’s volunteerism indeed had fostered the initial growth of libraries at the turn of the century, but another breed of volunteerism among libraries served as a more depressing force as the century progressed. Demand for library work did not decrease over time and libraries began to depend more and more on unpaid labor. This call for volunteers has served continually as an economic stop-gap to staff libraries. Over the course of the twentieth century, volunteerism also created a more severe hierarchy between those working and volunteering in libraries, a majority of whom have been women. As librarian historian Cheryl Malone explains the situation, relevant to contemporary librarians, “Volunteers work side-by-side with paid professionals, women who historically had to negotiate a place for themselves in the public arena legitimated by pay” (289). The relationship between status and pay for librarians is certainly illustrated in the 1892 women’s meeting. The low status of female librarians at the turn of the last century may have been encouraged by administrators to justify their lower pay with seemingly empirical claims that their work was inferior, but the status of library work still and again is threatened by both economic realities, and by attitudes regarding feminized work spaces. Professional librarians are affected by the use of volunteers first because it shapes the focus of their work. When heavily dependent on volunteers, much of the professional librarians’ time must focus on training them (Malone 292). Secondly, the use of unpaid workers to perform library work makes an implicit statement about its overall value, which is demoralizing for those who are paid for the work. The lack of value placed on community librarians has precipitated a recent exodus of librarians from New York City libraries to higher paying jobs at dot.coms and in the suburbs. The city’s librarians, despite their education and responsibility, make less than the city’s garbage workers. One New York librarian actually likened her paid job to volunteer work, claiming she could only afford to work as a librarian because her husband earned a high salary (Greenhouse B1+).

HOSTESSING COMPOSITION

The parallels between library staffing and the staffing of composition at the turn of the last century are comparable theoretically because, in each
case, work conditions in both fields allegedly shifted to accommodate middle class women’s entrance into the previously male domains of education and work in the public sphere. According to Robert Connors, the increased presence of women in college rhetoric courses shifted the focus from oral rhetoric to written rhetoric because male students felt uncomfortable competing with women in a combative, oral arena. “As women entered colleges,” Connors claims, “the older rhetoric course organized around argument and public contest made men (and some women) uncomfortable. Agonistic behavior—sharp debating techniques, cutting criticism, sarcastic dismissal—directed against women during these early Victorian times was disquieting to many” (Composition-Rhetoric 62). Regardless of whether or not this shift was brought about explicitly from women’s entrance into the academy, responding to written rhetoric was more labor-intensive than responding to oral rhetoric. We in composition are all familiar with the dynamic whereby this work load for rhetoric teachers led to its demise as a popular and esteemed teaching subject. By 1900, the status of the rhetoric teacher had plummeted. This work, like library work, was also marked by low pay (Connors “Overwork/Underpay” 108). Moreover, like library work, the teaching of writing became associated with service and thus, although housed in elite venues, joined the ranks of what economists have referred to as “semi-professions” or “sub-professions” (Matthaei 208) like social work, nursing, and primary and secondary school teaching. Composition work, as with library work, was essentialized and became identified as women’s work in particular. This essentialization was no doubt employed for similar reasons in each field: to justify lower salaries because there was a lot of work for which to pay. In a 1924 faculty survey, one English faculty member claimed that, “[a] number, and it was more often stated by heads of English departments than by others, think women do a better job of routine work, such as freshman composition, than men, as they are ‘pains-taking,’ conscientious, and enthusiastic” (qtd. in Schell 32). Herbert Putnam, the Librarian of Congress in 1912, might have agreed that the attention to detail required of teaching composition, as with library work, called on women’s special attention to “particulars.”

These parallels between the staffing of libraries and the staffing of composition at the turn of the last century are worth noting, but more recent trends in the staffing of composition courses by women provide an additional and more troubling framework for comparison. The shifting definitions of literacy in conjunction with educational goals and opportunities for Americans between the beginning of the century and now, like the apparent democratization of education brought about by public libraries, has continued to thrust its double-edged sword into a larger female community seeking self and professional fulfillment. The cultural capital

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derived from this literacy, the location for acquiring it, and how it is valued, is marked by its changing location: from private study via public libraries to four year institutions and community colleges—where labor problems were burgeoning already. This shift was brought about by two major forces. First, the G.I. bill, established after World War II, encouraged and popularized college among the larger population. A journey to a four year institution was once undertaken only by the elite and middle class members of society. Secondly, the development of the community college accommodated a large sector of the society hoping to gain job and literacy skills. These colleges didn’t require a high school diploma and, as is true today, their locations allowed working men and women to live at home while getting their degrees (Kett 407). The low costs of attending these institutions made this type of college education doubly accessible.

Many women who joined the ranks of non-traditional college students in the 1970s and 1980s became mothers or began working before going to college. Correspondence college courses and community colleges became sites for them to achieve credentials that could help them gain job skills as well as self-fulfillment. At the same time, in the 1970s and 1980s, just as more women entered colleges, particularly community colleges, and more women began obtaining their Ph.D.s, colleges began hiring contingent labor to staff writing courses. The reentrance of middle-class women into the job market and into academy in the 1970s could be compared to similar shifts in the 1870s when women similarly left the domestic sphere to work.

Eileen Schell’s investigation of composition staffing indicates further parallels between the staffing of libraries and freshman composition. Consider the increased credentialization of women in academia in the 1970s and 1980s, which occurred at the same time as a decrease in tenure-line jobs. College educated librarians at the turn of the century could find themselves overqualified just as women with Ph.Ds found themselves overqualified to staff the growing number of part-time, ill-paid jobs created to staff the influx of college students when writing programs boomed in the 1970s (Schell 75). In a chapter of Textual Carnivals, one cynically entitled “The Sad Women in the Basement,” Susan Miller makes similar claims. “When tenure track jobs were cut in the 1980s,” Miller argues, “women [in particular] began to fill jobs teaching English, but on a part-time basis” (124).

In her recent book concerning composition’s frustrating relationship with literature, whereby composition is at the bottom because of the many reasons cited above—primarily its relationship to service—Sharon Crowley points out another hierarchy that has manifested within the field of composition: its own, that between the field’s “professionals” and its “practitioners.” The many “self-made compositionists” (Schell 35) like Crowley made it to the top of the academic job market in the 1980s and
1990s. As with the professionalization of library science, the professionalization of composition helped promote some women into powerful positions. Unfortunately, as we know, this new field, is now "practitioner" heavy by default and design.

Crowley calls for the elimination of the first-year composition course partly in recognition of this new hierarchy. Just as there were tensions between the "trained" librarians at the turn of the century, there is now tension between those professionals in the field and the enormous population of "practitioners" whose curricula are dictated by this elite group. As Crowley explains, "This state of affairs will not change if liberal or radical academics merely redesign the course syllabus and continue to impose it on its conscripted teachers. Tenured academics have always dictated the terms of Freshman English teaching to its staff, and it is tenured academics who fight over its curriculum" (239). This positioning of "professional" compositionists as supervisors to its "practitioners" forces these professionals into a hierarchy as Crowley describes above or, if this hierarchy is removed, puts well paid tenure track writing teachers in the same duties as those paid part-time for the same work. In each case the profession, and persons performing the work, are potentially demoralized. Also, as with the conflict between educated librarians and job-trained librarians at the turn of the last century, the conflict between tenure-line composition scholars and non-tenured teachers of composition has created a class divide marked by discrepancies in power and pay for the two groups: those who teach by the piece and those who teach for tenure. Crowley's analysis of the role of composition also highlights another significant similarity between this contemporary field and library science as well as another aspect of class inherent to teaching writing. First-year composition, like libraries at the turn of the last century, has been been a vehicle for social control. "Freshman English," Crowley claims, "has always been a gesture toward general fears of illiteracy among the bourgeoisie, fears generated by America's very real class hierarchy" (235).

Like the librarian scholar Katherine Sharp in 1898, Crowley proposes a solution for labor problems within composition studies by promoting the field's knowledge-making capacity. A revamped curriculum, free from the constraints imposed upon it by the virtually universal requirement that students take first-year composition, would reposition the focus of the field to accommodate "expansive curricular terms" (243). Crowley rejects the mission of composition as it relates to work that is not considered knowledge-making—its "hemstitching." Again, ethos is achieved, theoretically, when considering how the field might or could differ from work performed traditionally by women. Interestingly, Crowley also suggests that in conjunction with a diversified curriculum, administrators
should strengthen writing centers, a solution which calls into question how the ethos of writing centers would fare when the composition curriculum rejects its service role yet depends on the writing center to provide support, and thus a type of service, for this curriculum.

Elizabeth Boquet’s recent scholarship on the history of writing centers documents a fragile ethos within the academy due to staffing issues, which highlights a staffing problem within writing centers that Crowley fails to address. As a money saving device, writing centers, in their infancy, began a system of peer tutoring. In this system, prevalent today, college undergraduates are employed as writing center tutors. Obviously, staffing undergraduates as tutors is cheaper than hiring faculty. As Boquet explains, “The presence of peer tutors addressed, though imperfectly, both the call for human contact and the very real fiscal constraints faced by labs (since peer tutors are less expensive to employ than faculty)” (474). The use of peer tutors, rather than full time tenure-line faculty to staff writing centers, could compare to the fiscal solution posed by Frederick Gilman, in 1876, who argued that a female labor force would be inexpensive (Garrison 175). Also, like libraries, writing centers resemble the domestic space associated with women and women’s work, and writing center scholars, we know, are often dismissed by the larger academy because of the service nature of their work: the attention to “particulars” required of it.

Like Sharp and Crowley, Boquet is conscious about the relationship between ethos, power and knowledge-making and also poses an inversion of the paradigm which casts the writing center as a budgetary stop-gap, staffed accordingly. She hopes that writing centers become centers of “liberation rather than regulation” (479). The key to this transformation, for Boquet, is story telling, a chance to articulate the knowledge gained from working one-on-one with “clients” of the academy. She hopes these stories “write the developments of the contemporary writing center in theoretically sophisticated ways” (479). Boquet suggests that “theorizing,” rather than purely managing or masking the stories and the conflicts that they may represent or foster, may help raise the status of the work performed in stereotypically domestic spaces, and make visible this parlor of the academy. In short, writing centers would be regarded as a space in tandem with curriculum development, not subordinate to it. While Boquet’s solution for the status of writing centers in the field does not solve the issue of staffing, or the possibilities for status in a tenure-conscious academy, it does suggest an ethos that mingles knowledge-making with service.

HOSTESSING LITERACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The synthesis between service and knowledge-making inherent to Boquet’s quest for ethos parallels a discussion during what I’ll nickname “A
Year 2000 Meeting” among contemporary library workers. Although the issues voiced in this “meeting” were surprisingly similar to those of the 1892 librarian women’s meeting, the Year 2000 meeting was made possible by twenty-first century technology; it took the form of online postings in response to a prompt on the online “Colloquy” forum sponsored by the Chronicle of Higher Education. Also different: men and women participated in this “meeting” to discuss and respond to a question about an article published in the April 7, 2000 issue of The Chronicle. The author Katherine S. Mangan, highlights the transformed nature of library science education as represented by the changing names of the programs and the programs’ students, and how this change relates to salaries in the field as a whole. For example, the University of Michigan’s library science program is now called the “School of Information,” and only a third of the program’s graduates will become traditional librarians. This trend, Mangan states, “rankles some traditional librarians” who accuse library schools of abandoning their commitment to traditional library studies. For the University of Michigan, this switch in focus has monetary significance marked by a budget of $12 million—up from a fledgling budget of $1 million in 1992—and the possibility that its graduates may earn up to $90,000 working for high tech companies upon graduation.

Responses to the article, and the issues underlying it, were diverse, articulate, and sometimes heated suggesting that the juxtaposition of technology and librarianship—symbolized by the University of Michigan dropping the “I” word, library, from its program name—is more complicated than the article would suggest. Many agreed that the focus on technology was inevitable and that librarians have been technological experts for years. Some embraced the change; others argued that the focus on technology de-emphasized service within the profession. As one librarian put it, “Cataloguing . . . is really about making information available in a standardized manner to more people.” Others argued that nothing has changed and that, for example, “[i]nformation formats may change from books to computers, but the underlying skills necessary to classify and access information have not changed.” Two librarians agreed that removing the “L-word,” librarian, might elevate the status of librarians. A Boston University Law Librarian wrote, for example, “I’m all for it, especially if it means the skills librarians have had all along get the . . . decent salaries they deserve!” The Library Director of the Philadelphia University Library insisted, “The push to drive [library] out of traditional library programs was essentially an economically motivated strategy,” resulting in higher salaries among graduating library professionals. Others thought that the shift to technology was logical but the “L word” should remain. The campus librarian at George Brown University wrote, “Of course, the trend
to rename all the LIBRARY [sic] schools only serves to erode our professional identity and this from the gurus in our field. We can add [to] the names of our schools but should keep the ‘L’ word.” A community college librarian agreed, ‘The rationale for this change, as I understood it, was to move away from using the ‘L’ word, and being a movement to call librarians ‘Information Specialists.’ . . . Perhaps the image of the librarian can be strengthened by demonstrating that the information age needs those who are trained in acquiring, organizing and dispensing information—the librarian!”

Consider the common and easy relationship these librarians recognize between the word library and low status. They’re aware that some think information expert, or whatnot, would garner more respect. It’s as if 100 years later the profession had finally the opportunity to wrestle itself away from its association with “hemstitching”—work that isn’t skillful, just plain old women’s work. But the more the exchange was emphasized—information expert for librarian—as the discussion continued, the more an entanglement between the two seemed evident or more accurate. A name change for the work librarians did and does add to the professions’ cache, and maybe even to its practitioners’ cash flow, but the work remains focused on finding ways to organize and help others find information, and much of that work is technical these days. In the end, it seems it isn’t the work that is changing, but the value placed on the work. In fact, current developments in the school of library science at the University of Illinois reflect a tension but also a blending between the job of an information expert and a traditional librarian. A majority of the schools’ students train to be traditional librarians, but their courses emphasize service as it applies to business exigencies for those seeking work in corporations. While it may be inevitable that the word librarian be removed from schools’ titles, it’s not necessarily accurate to assume that typical librarian expertise has been extracted from the technological expert’s job (Palmer).

**FURTHER IMPLICATIONS FOR HOSTESSING LITERACY**

Writing teachers and writing centers, depending on their access and the budgets of their schools, do not necessarily have the same opportunity to gain ethos through an explicit association with technological infrastructures, as librarians might. At the same time, however, the literacy promised by composition (and writing centers) parallels current demands for writing skills adaptable to new technologies. For example, one group of economists and civic leaders are theorizing the possibility of universal access to email, and partly justify their mission with the democracy made possible through it. “[E]lectronic mail,” the group writes, “makes possible more egalitarian, deliberative, and reflective dialogue among individuals and groups.
Universal access to email might therefore lead to new social and political linkages within U.S. society, reduce the feelings of alienation that many individuals in the United States feel and give them a sense of ‘community,’ revitalize the involvement of the common citizen in the political process, etc., and in general strengthen the cohesion of U.S. society” (Anderson et al. 10-11). Consistently, the city of Santa Monica, California recently attempted to establish an infrastructure to support universal access to email, at least to its own citizens. The city’s leaders set up donated computer equipment to facilitate this access in the city’s libraries, the city’s schools, the city hall, their senior citizen center, one of their parks, and even their Red Cross office.

The rhetoric of the groups hoping to administer universal access to email also suggests that composition, emphasizing written literacy, is vulnerable to the same nativist anxieties that, in part, contributed to the development of the country’s first libraries. The motive of social control is commonly attributed to the philanthropic ideals of Andrew Carnegie, who donated libraries to various urban communities (Garrison 49). Frederic de Peyster, a pillar of the New York community and descendent of one Manhattan’s founders, was quite overt about this purpose for public libraries in an address to the New York City Historical Society in 1865 when stating, “This city is exposed to the vices of the great cities abroad which immigration introduces. To counteract the evils, which irreligion, folly and wickedness have thus transplanted, it becomes our duty to control their effects, and then eradicate them, by being prepared to stem this flood and make it subservient to the purposes which minister to social progress” (48). The coinciding aims of the creators of public libraries and the advocates of universal access to email may be no accident. From 1980 to the present, immigration has reached the same proportions as it did at the turn of the last century. A majority of these more recent immigrants have been Asians and Latinos (Muller 105). This increased immigration has allegedly precipitated anti-immigration among the American population. California, the site of much of this immigration anxiety, also the site of the universal email access program mentioned above, went so far as to propose legislation such as Proposition 187, which would exclude aliens from public services like hospitals and schools (Perea 2).

Whether or not universal access to email would exclude or include these aliens (a symbolic term), one could argue that the claim of its proponents, that the instigation of such an infrastructure would make better American citizens, reflects an historically rooted tension among American leaders when mass immigration diversifies, or threatens to diversify, American culture and politics. Moreover, Anne Ruggles Gere identifies literacy’s role in measuring the “quality” of immigrants at the turn of the last
century. Literacy tests and regulations were proposed to restrict illiterate immigrants from gaining citizenship (20). This history coincides with the suggested parallel between historical and contemporary anxieties about immigration and their corresponding links to the establishment of mass literacy programs couched as democratic projects. In each case, literacy is attractive because of its potential to bring about a better and more moral society. Literacy is a gift from a sector of the society who can provide it to another sector that can’t get it on its own.

While the case of universal email as a means for stabilizing and democratizing a diverse society may resemble the democratization of literacy promised by the establishment of libraries, the term universal has additional connotations for composition—a field burdened by the nearly universal requirement that a majority of college students take first-year composition upon entering the university and the obligation that writing centers aid in students’ introduction to college writing. Social feminist Nancy Fraser, whose theory Crowley cites in support of her proposal to eliminate the universal requirement for first-year composition, would probably be skeptical of the universal “need” for literacy—both because of the social control insinuated by articulated needs and the exploitation inherent in them (Unruly Practices 163). At the same time, Fraser calls for a restructuring of the labor market so that “care work” employment is paid on par with work traditionally associated with “masculinity” (Justice Interruptus 51). The use of volunteers by contemporary libraries in place of paid workers demonstrates how structures adapt to fulfill what is perceived to be a need for work that at the same time is perceived to be invaluable enough to be unpaid.

Even aside from the hypothetical restructuring of composition programs suggested by Crowley, writing center work in particular may be called upon to meet literacy needs of a more diverse population seeking an education, in which nativist anxieties may or not play a role. Members of the New London Group, an educational think tank, claim that the literacy needs of the world population are shifting to accommodate changing technologies as well as a diversity of discourses. Anticipating the needs of this population, the New London group has drafted a model of education that encourages instruction tailored to individuals, as in the one-on-one interaction possible in writing centers. Within the New London Group’s model, “Classroom teaching and curriculum have to engage with students’ own experiences and discourses, which are increasingly defined by cultural and subcultural diversity and the different language backgrounds and practices that come with this diversity” (88). The future of education might lie therefore in knowledge-making achieved through dialogue, a teaching style emphasized by writing centers, in which knowledge is conceived.
through dialogic exchange or, as Boquet might suggest, through story telling.

A Temporary Synthesis

I have pursued the point that librarians and writing teachers have been historical sisters and have lived parallel lives. The site for assimilation into the middle class has generally shifted from the private study made available through libraries to colleges. Composition and library science thus developed in response to similar but separate forces. These fields established spaces for autonomy, creativity, and publishing for those present during the fields’ burgeoning developments. As it is true of library science, the professionalization of composition has been empowering, yet it has also led to a conflict between those who are trained in the academy and those who have been trained on the job. As more and more compositionists are trained in the academy, this conflict between practitioners and professionals is destined to widen. Although it won’t be women or men in particular leading the academy, this structure—whereby workers in so-called community-centered sites, like writing centers or first-year composition classrooms, are subordinated by pay and status to workers and administrators in the academy—resembles library science in 1930 at the completion of its professionalization. The stigmatization of community librarians in the field of library science has continued, in part, as community librarians leave ill-paid posts to work in corporate America. One could also argue that composition’s increasingly bifurcated work force, and its struggle for status, stem from the same history that has stigmatized community library work. The teaching of first-year composition by part-timers, and the use of undergraduate writers to staff writing centers, may be akin to using volunteers in libraries. Thus, the staffing of composition has been shaped by the same budget constraints dictating the staffing of community libraries.

As with libraries, writing centers were developed in response to both alleged and actual literacy needs of diverse populations. Their work is dictated both by the academies they represent and the members of these academic communities whose writing needs they serve. Those who have directed and written about writing centers represent their purpose as sites for local and field-wide knowledge-making, their marginalization both within colleges and within the field demonstrates an historical and contemporary ambivalence toward the quality of work performed in such community-centered sites. This has also been the case with community libraries—manifested in how community librarians have been and are paid, poorly or not at all.

Issues of labor and transformation in the library field can thus provide lessons for composition—as we pursue our mission of service, rehabilitate

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our field’s vulnerable status, and increase our attention to writing as a pivotal literacy tool. In the best situation, composition and writing centers can gain a kind of cyborgian revenge on the Humanities, which has traditionally devalued writing instruction. If able to juggle these tensions between service and growth responsibly, we may consider the way that writing’s association with technology can bring better ethos, and even dollars, to a program, as it has for library science schools and some library workers. I suggest that we also study how librarians struggle with a possible synthesis between service and technology, the word that has gotten lost in translation or transformation, at least in some parts, *librarian*, and what this says about our regard for work historically associated with women and service to communities.

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**WORKS CITED**


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