

## Book Review—*Alone with Each Other: Literature and Literacy Intertwined* by Eli Goldblatt

Elizabeth Kimball Drexel University

In my sometimes-murky role as a writing program administrator, I often think about Eli Goldblatt's chapter "Lunch" in *Because We Live Here: Sponsoring Literacy Beyond the College Curriculum*. Goldblatt posits the main job of a writing program administrator is to have lunch with as many people on campus as possible. His advice is simple. I tell myself it's a lesson I already know. Yet again and again, just as I begin to wonder if I should renew that WPA contract the next time, I run into someone new on campus, we discover all that we share in our hopes for our institution, we make a plan or two, and I remember I have Eli to thank.

This kind of move characterizes Goldblatt, both as a person and as a writer and scholar. His personability leads, distracting us from the fact that he is also a profound thinker whose writing models what we value most in composition, rhetoric, and literacy studies: it gently sets aside our concerns with form—genre form, forms of difference, disciplinary forms—and helps us commune, instead, through practice.

For that reason, we are lucky now to have Goldblatt's new book, *Alone with Each Other: Literature and Literacy Intertwined*, a compilation of his published writing from the beginning of his career in rhetoric and composition to the present, between 1995 and 2022. Divided into three sections by topic—Composition Theory and Pedagogy, Community Literacy, and Poetics and Practice—the collection reveals, at last, just how much is really going on in Goldblatt's work when we see it in its wholeness.

In the excellent new introductory chapter, Goldblatt shows us how he's been thinking of his tripartite work all these years, straddling university writing programs and literature departments, community literacy settings, and the poetry community. Goldblatt loosens literacy and literature from their disciplinary forms and reframes them, so that "literacy" denotes reading and writing in the world, and "literature" means reading and writing for art's sake. Then he argues that this reframing allows us to make our way around and through their politicized institutional histories. While we in composition have often lamented our precarity and lesser status in relation to literary study, Goldblatt shows us how to respect our own grounding in our peculiar intersection of college writing, English literature, and English education.

But what Goldblatt also achieves—without stating as his aim—is a tender embrace of the varying stances, and dare I say open conflicts, within composition itself. He extols Aja Martinez's work drawing on Critical Race Theory, for instance, seeing a kindred spirit in the conviction that "argumentation divorced from accounts of lived experience too easily leaves oppressive structures in place" (7). He brings this newer critical work into conversation with the earlier energies of the social turn, especially the "often . . . misunderstood" work of David Bartholomae. Goldblatt writes that

we should remember Bartholomae for his “unapologetically . . . compassionate humanism,” which means reading all texts as closely as “literary” texts, because “language and literature are life-defining pursuits that matter for both individual and collective groups” (9). By putting these voices, and indeed, many of the voices across English studies, in conversation, Goldblatt shows how “Everyone in ‘English’ is telling a story or a counter-story or a counter-counterstory about language” (7).

The rest of the book unfolds the many ways that Goldblatt has developed this approach, taking us along through his life as a poet and in the poetry community, a Philadelphian, a partner in community literacy and organizing, a university faculty member and administrator, and a scholar of literacy. The book archives (if not comprehensively) Goldblatt’s considerable intellectual and artistic publications. The selections represent research of all sorts: classroom-based, community-based, and textual. Several examples of his poetry are remarkable in their own right, and add a glow to the expository genres.

Part I, *Composition Theory and Pedagogy*, includes Goldblatt’s interpretation of literacy sponsorship from his first book *Round My Way*, as well as a co-authored article on classroom discussion with literacy scholar (and Temple University colleague) Michael W. Smith. Two more articles draw from Goldblatt’s Jewish heritage. “Making *Charoset*: Teaching by Hand in the Shadow of MOOCS” draws from his life with the artist Wendy Osterweil and their shared theme of “teaching as an art done ‘by hand’” (67). He writes the essay in his mind as he chops apples and crushes walnuts for the Passover dish, substituting a discourse on Walter Benjamin in favor of a meditation on how writing classrooms are like family gatherings, how all life lived in person lets us be alive to the “presences contained momentarily within” (71). As we now contend with the world of AI, which takes us ever further from composing by hand, I am glad this beautifully composed essay—originally a blog post—is preserved in print.

Part II includes six important articles about Goldblatt’s extensive work in community literacy, at the heart of the book as it is at the heart of his life’s work. This collection demonstrates how central he has been to this movement within rhetoric and composition. The section begins with his entry “Community Literacy” written for *A Rhetoric for Writing Program Administrators*, with the useful definition of community literacy as “a framework from which people with remarkably different outlooks, commitments, and backgrounds can come together to discuss, plan, execute, and assess actions that can make shared social spaces more vibrant and equitable” (103). His wisdom on working in community comes across in many stories about his work with incarcerated people and with the Temple University neighbors of North Philadelphia and small community organizations; he pairs it with extensive connection to the voices in the field of community literacy. This section is a great place to start for those looking to understand this community of scholar-activists, or to revisit it.

It is his writing on poetry, comprising part III, that was most revelatory to me, and that makes this collection most distinctive. Here he shows us how his thinking on literacy comes full circle through the writing of poetry. In “Imagining the Local: William Carlos Williams, John Dewey, and Community Literacy,” Goldblatt asks us to notice how the spare line of the modernist poet may be indistinguishable from the evocative expression of a child described in Shirley Brice Heath’s

*Ways with Words*. In doing so he walks us through his intellectual journey to settle in the study of community literacies, as he comes to realize how he is “seeking new instances of that search for the local” that Williams had seemingly brought to light (224–26). He quotes the poet Gary Snyder, who wrote that “the most radical thing we can do today is live in one place for the rest of our lives” (230). In “The Poetics of Remembering,” Goldblatt lays out his “poetics—a theory of making.” It is his “central task,” he writes, “to remember myself among others in each moment” (184).

The book also works as a history of the emergence and development of rhetoric and composition as a field, and for that reason would make great reading in graduate courses, including teaching practicum courses that include students in creative writing and literature degree programs. For the same reason, many of us who have been a part of the field for some time will find it of interest too. Goldblatt was around for the early days of rhet-comp; when he writes about formative figures like Deborah Brandt, Martin Nystand, David Bartholomae, and Linda Flower, he helps us come to know them as people. At the same time, he has been a champion of many emerging scholars in the generations since, bearing witness to important scholars of diverse identities who in turn bear witness to the full diversity of literacies and ways of knowing in their own work. Scholars like Steven Alvarez, Carmen Kynard, Iris Ruiz, and his own former students including Jessica Restaino and Meaghan Brewer, all figure as equals in his thinking.

That said, the story of the field that Goldblatt tells is told through the lens of his own commitments to community literacy and an ever-widening scope of knowing through the diversity of human experience. This collection is not a place to go if you are looking for the trajectory of work on movements like digital or multimodal literacies, new materialist approaches, or postcomposition. Nor does it offer much in formal research methods, whether qualitative or quantitative, that have been important for our work in curriculum and program administration. Goldblatt’s writing represents the best of the humanistic tradition in composition.

One could argue that Goldblatt’s core argument is one of place: how one is (and isn’t) at home; how literacies are always and only made of people in place; how abstract ideas grow from precise experiences in certain places, like graduate school, a community bookstore, or a kitchen of Passover preparations. Such place-based consciousness constitutes a familiar politics in composition. We know that where we come from is who we are, and we aim to teach and act in the world in ways that repair the inequities borne of place-based discrimination. Goldblatt is a profound teacher of this truth. But to me it is the *timeliness* of writing that he is really teaching us to understand. Poetry is not for “expressing” oneself, he insists (to the challenge of those who misunderstand the expressivist tradition). Neither is literacy about achievement. Both of these assumptions imagine a solid ground that can be stood on, once having written. Rather, it is the practice of unfolding with language that matters, he writes, “no matter what you compose” (264).

Whatever your knowledge of Goldblatt’s work (and if it’s minimal, get to know *Because We Live Here* and “Alinsky’s Reveille” as well), this collection is worth seeking out. Even those of us who know him well likely do not fully understand the significance of his work until we read this book. Like Monet’s many paintings of haystacks, Goldblatt’s project is not simply to record a single impression but, in the aggregate, to learn a new way of seeing that transcends what appears to be

an obvious material reality. His invitational approach and his admittedly “digressive argument” (181) leave endless openings for writers of all kinds of take up and keep going with his questions and commitments. This collection shows that how, as a scholar of literacies inside and outside of academia, Goldblatt is at the same time a poet and philosopher of language, and of our encounters with one another.

## Works Cited

- Goldblatt, Eli. "Alinsky's Reveille: A Community-Organizing Model for Neighborhood-Based Literacy Projects." *College English*, vol. 67, no. 3, 2005, pp. 274-95, [doi:10.2307/30044637](https://doi.org/10.2307/30044637).
- . *Alone with Each Other: Literacy and Literature Intertwined*. Peter Lang, 2024.
- . *Because We Live Here: Sponsoring Literacy Beyond the College Curriculum*. Hampton Press, 2007.