Happy St. Patrick’s Day! Certainly, with a family name like Kells, I need to acknowledge this good Irish holiday. This an important day in several ways—an anniversary, of sorts. This is the date six years ago that my family and I made our house-hunting trip to ABQ New Mexico after I accepted the offer to join the faculty at the University of New Mexico. It was, like most of my career, a trip filled with the unexpected, a comedy of errors. The axle of the camper we decided to drive from College Station, Texas to ABQ, New Mexico, burned out and stranded us in Vernon, Texas on St. Patrick’s Day. Trust me, you do not want to be stranded in Vernon, Texas on any day. As a result, we missed the sale of the dream house we had hoped to buy in Albuquerque. And when our daughter finally set eyes the high school where she would be finishing her senior year, a sad constellation of house trailers and boarded up classrooms on the desert mesa of Moriarity, New Mexico (home of the Pintos—not horses mind you, but the Pinto Bean capital of the world), we were not sure that the luck of the Irish had befallen us. More to that story another time.

And today marks another moment for me. The honor of being here as the plenary speaker for the Research Network Forum brings to mind the first time I attended the RNF as a graduate student over 10 years ago. I met Ollie, Risa, and Kim for the first time at
CCCC in March 1997 in Phoenix Arizona, thrilled, proud, and very, very nervous about presenting my work-in-progress research on basic writing and language attitudes of bilingual writers. I believe I met Paul Matsuda for the first time that year as well. We were both graduate students. And fast-forward to the new millennium, Paul had the honor of appearing as the RNF Plenary speaker last year. Now he is an Associate Professor at Arizona State leading the Second Language Writing programs and I am in New Mexico doing WAC with a twist. It’s been a busy decade for a lot of us in Composition Studies.

It is very appropriate for us to discuss the UNM WAC initiative at here RNF, because like the work you are bringing here today, WACommunities is a work-in-progress. I would like to provide you with a hand-out of WACommunities “first principles,” and history at UNM. I’ve also included a website link to our WAC resources, bibliography of publications. After five years of coalition-building and conceptualizing WACommunities, we are moving toward the implementation of an institutionalization plan—an imaginative fiction of what we hope will become a systemic, university-wide incorporation of WAC. The impetus for WACommunities at UNM began five years ago with some nagging questions about linguistic diversity. These guiding questions center on issues of language, identity, and social justice.

My own intellectual work coalesces around themes of agency and language diversity. I have been posing questions, implementing language research, and framing case studies focused on public rhetoric and ethnolinguistic stratification for over ten years now. Contributing to the fields of Cultural Rhetorical Studies and literacy studies, my work can be most aptly cast as the rhetoric of civic engagement and the pedagogy of social access. These twin interests intertwine and unify the broad range of intellectual
threads weaving throughout my scholarship, teaching, and service. It looks like that story has acquired a public patina, of sorts. I recently did a Google search for myself. This was not an exercise in self-adulation, I assure you. The ridiculous truth of it is this: the Department of English at UNM has been revamping our department website over the past year while I’ve been on sabbatical and (intentionally or inadvertently eliminated all our faculty homepages). I simply couldn’t find myself. So I got on Google and put in my name: Michelle Hall Kells. And after scrolling through the some 28,000 links with my name in them stretching back to my life as a graduate student at Texas A&M University, I’m no closer to finding myself than I was when I started my search. Language anchors us; written text helps make us palpable to others and ourselves—and it can also make us invisible, incomprehensible.

Most of us come to the profession speaking and teaching English as our first language. And after helping students move through the academy to learn academic discourses, guiding their mastery print and digital orthographies, and shaping their acquisition of prestige registers some of us alarmingly discover—through our complicit enmeshment with the prescriptivist project of teaching academic discourse—that we are in effect “speaking life as a second language”¹ We wake up and realize that what we are teaching has very little to do with the universe our students live in.

I believe that we engage life in the classroom through language (oral and written)—enacted in the everyday discourses we bring as students and teachers (our histories, our cultures, our families, our communities of belonging). We are languages in contact—our bodies, our voices, our texts. There is an archeology of discourse, memory, and emotion each of brings to every rhetorical situation, every act of literacy. As
Chomsky’s distinction between competency and performance illustrates, we know more than we can represent. These consideration demand that we ask: How can we make language and literacy education more equitable, more appropriate, more ethical? It disturbs me that the primary mechanism in our field for promoting interdisciplinary literacy education, WAC or Writing Across the Curriculum or WID Writing in the Disciplines, has been historically preoccupied with academic discourses. The traditional narrow scope of WAC, consequently, effaces the vital dimension of students’ own languages, ethnolinguistic identities, and discursive histories from the educational exchange.

These factors eventually have challenged me ask to: How can WAC cultivate the conditions across the university (not only in our Composition classrooms) for the level of intimate, professional, and academic engagement that makes learning and development possible? Because the constitution of identity and cross-cultural positionality are always mediated through discourse, I argue that “Writing Across Communities” (as an approach to WAC) foregrounds issues of ethnolinguistic diversity in order to make authentic linguistic and efficacious textual exchange and human communication possible. The linguistic and textual outcomes of a Writing Across Communities model promotes critical engagement and cultural belonging across disciplinary, cultural, professional and civic communities. A WACCommunities model can serve as a catalyst to changing cultures of writing within and beyond the university, if we more fully represent and respond to the range of literacy practices associated with the civic, cultural, professional, and academic experiences of our students.
What are the implications of a Writing Across Communities approach to literacy education for WPAs, WAC and Writing Centers directors, Composition teachers, and researchers? Our experiences building a WACommunities initiative at UNM suggests that WAC can serve as powerful mechanism for stimulating and sustaining not only a dialogue about literacy education but a dialectic for civic engagement. I would like to talk about what I see as some of the implications of WACommunities model of literacy education by discussing some of the key events and projects of the UNM initiative. Equally important, I want to discuss the implications for you as future leaders in Composition Studies. The increasing porosity between oral and written communication wherein texting is quickly becoming the way we “chat” to each other. It makes me wonder: are we witnessing an inversion of primary and secondary discourses? I recently watched a group of high school seniors on prom night sitting together around the table at Buca di Beppo, not talking, but texting each other. Or how about the groom who stopped the preacher in the middle of his wedding ceremony to update his Facebook page? Perhaps there is something to this headline published last month in the Albuquerque Journal, “I Text Therefore I Evolve.”

Let me begin with the construct of “tragicomic hope.” Drawing on the work of critical theorist Cornel West, Keith Gilyard examines the notion of tragicomic hope in his most recent book, *Composition and Cornel West: Notes Toward a Deep Democracy*. West defines “tragicomic hope as “the ability to laugh and retain a sense of life’s joy—to preserve hope even while staring in the face of hate and hypocrisy—as against falling into the nihilism of paralyzing despair.” This is an especially productive frame for engaging the ambiguities of literacy education and social mobilization. As my research in
literacy studies and civil rights rhetoric reveals, all “success” is at best provisional. There are no “once-done-always-done” solutions to educational reform or social justice. So we need to build dialectic into our institutional structures to perpetually resist entropy and entrenchment. I invite you to think of your own vision of your future career in the field. Imagine yourself as a teacher, scholar, and future writing program administrator. We all come to the profession with vision, hope, and good intentions. The question is: what will life and the realities of teaching, writing, research, leadership make of you in the process?

And consider, will you, the implicit paradox of our field (the horns of the proverbial dilemma of Rhetoric & Composition). We belong to a profession in which we all must satisfy two desires: to write and to be useful. Most of us are seduced into the field by the poetic truths of literature then find ourselves married to the profession by way of the pragmatic truths of literacy. If we were only concerned with other peoples’ writing we would be Literary critics. If we were only concerned with our own writing we would be “Creative Writers” and if we were only concerned with being useful we would be “Technical/Professional Writers.” Annie Dillard sums it up nicely in A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek like this: “Funny thing, written culture, I guess. We pass things on.”

To help us think about these questions, I look to a recent film titled, The Sensation of Sight. The protagonist of this film is not the heroic Michelle Pfeifer figure of Dangerous Minds or Richard Dreyfus of Mr. Holland’s Opus. There are no “Freedom Writers” in this classroom—Sorry Hilary Swank. Our protagonist is an anti-hero, a Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin tragiccomic figure. I assigned this film last spring to my graduate seminar in Writing Program Administration. I asked my grad. students to devote
our regularly scheduled class session to a movie night and a set of discussion questions related to the profession. I offered astute and probing questions like: “Why this title, “The Sensation of Sight?” What are the implications of the protagonist’s emerging world view for re-conceptualizing literacy? Pedagogy? Himself in the world? What does the protagonist imply when he laments that he finds it insufferable that “life has become my second language?”

And my grad. students dutifully met for their designated movie night in one another’s homes, sharing beer and pizza, and completing the assigned discussion questions—in between exchanging two hours of Mystery Science Theatre-style commentaries about this thematically-opaque film about a high school English teacher who leaves the profession to peddle encyclopedias door-to-door in a red wagon. They were not the least bit shy to report to me that this film was not the earth-shattering viewing experience I had promised it would be. It was a silly; it was puzzling; it was disjointed; it was frustrating. In short, it reflected exactly the kind career that most of us have in Composition Studies. Let me illustrate.

The conversations evolving around WACommunities at the University of New Mexico have initiated cross-departmental and cross-community discussions on civil rights, civic literacy, place-based learning, ethnolinguistic identity, and academic access. WACommunities supports, connects, and enhances the intellectual life of students and faculty engaged in the academic mission of creating and circulating knowledge. This initiative promotes student-faculty engagement through writing for the benefit of diverse disciplinary, cultural, civic, and professional communities across the university. Toward these ends, WACommunities has informed a number of intra-departmental as well inter-
departmental initiatives: the revision of First Year Writing, the formation of the WAC Alliance for graduate students, and the implementation of WOW! Write On Workshops for first year writing students, the Celebration of Student Writing, WAC Civic Literacy and Civil Rights Colloquia Series.

Additionally, the WACCommunities initiative has supported the establishment of a university writing center, taken an active role in the provost’s Diversity Committee, advanced faculty development and writing assessment workshops, and most recently, initiated the university-wide core curriculum task force. Most recently, I have been serving as the chair for the UNM Core Curriculum Task Force since July 2009 (yes—I accepted that appointment from the New Mexico State Secretary of Higher Education but that story would require an entire plenary address in itself—and several good bottles of wine. ) But let me just say that the first Open Meeting of the Core Curriculum Task Force evoked 5,000 virtual hits to the Core Curriculum Task Force Facebook page and drew over 100 undergraduate students in person on a Friday afternoon. Students, faculty, staff, and administrators engaged in a productive and respectful discussion about general education, an event following on the heels of recent spate of student protests from California to Wisconsin erupting around the nation on National Day of Action for Public Education on March 4. Yes, we are doing WAC with a Difference.

My role as WAC program chair, has been largely as a liaison and advocate, connecting the local situation to the national conversation. In practice, I have been less an administrator and more of an agitator and intellectual architect. This protean role has not only required organizing social action behind-the-scenes, but finding new ways to
mobilize diverse constituencies toward a collective re-evaluation of how we teach writing across the university.⁴

Additionally, I have served as program chair for the UNM Civil Rights Symposium 2007-2009. My graduate students and I coordinated these events to mark the fortieth anniversaries of landmark events in US civil rights reform. The response for 2007, 2008, and 2009 events exceeded imagination. Hundreds filled our sessions. We practiced the deliberative ethics of peaceful social engagement. Meeting rooms gushed over with students from high school to graduate school. One vintage faculty panelist for our 2008 Civil Rights Symposium remarked that the event reminded him of the “Sit-Ins” at UNM in 1968. In contrast to 40 years ago, however, our 2008 student mobs were respectful, engaged, peaceful, and cooperative throughout the entire deliberative process of the symposium. We only feared that the Student Union Building supervisor would throw us out for violating the fire codes (stuffing 250 students in a room limited for 120).

I would like to invite you to consider how we might expand the scholarly literature on WACcommunities. My colleague Juan Guerra and I have published several articles on a WACcommunities model. We have a co-authored book in progress. Additionally, my graduate students and I have delivered a number of presentations at local and national conferences. I have heard some scholars describe the act of exercising authority in the profession as “controlling the field.” But that’s a flawed notion, a faulty metaphor. Controlling the field is not the object of the scholarly life. I would argue that our object is cultivating the field, recognizing the abundance, living in a condition of enchantment. True, you want to find your niche, but never lose sight that your niche is part of a larger intellectual topography (that no single intellectual can ever own or
control). The gift dies when we stop circulating it. I discovered a while ago that poverty of spirit is the absence of wonder.

I recently told this story to a group of graduate students at Texas A&M University when I was invited back to my alma mater to discuss my work. Like many of you, they were interested in what to expect on the other side of the dissertation defense. I offered them this story as a representative anecdote. Here it is. Two years ago, I was invited to give a guest lecture on Mexican American civil rights issues at a small two-year college in Northern New Mexico. News of the success of the UNM Civil Rights Symposium had circulated throughout the state and the director of student life programs at this two-year college called my office phone to ask, “Would you bring your Civil Rights Symposium committee up to Las Vegas, NM?” What I couldn’t really explain was that there was no formal steering committee. It was not a transportable program. The event simply grew organically and serendipitously into 50 panelists, 4 keynote speakers, and 700 participants over the six month planning period. It was the end result of trying to be open and inclusive. The final program was unprecedented and unreplicable.

So there was no way I could bring this event up to Las Vegas, NM like a three-ring circus on a flat-bed truck. So I offered to go myself. The community college coordinator asked me to come and talk about my book on Dr. Hector García, so I agreed. She explained to me that their college had never had a guest speaker before, did not know what a symposium was supposed to do, and wasn’t sure that their students would understand how to participate in an open forum.

So I prepared a loosely-organized presentation and made the two-hour trip to Las Vegas, NM. I soon realized that I was in unfamiliar territory when the coordinator met
me at the door with a handful of helium balloons to decorate the cafeteria for my talk. She apologized because they weren’t able to reserve the auditorium, and she hoped that I would be able to deliver my presentation while the students were having lunch. I had recently delivered an impromptu presentation on the Hector García story to three hundred high school students on the westside of Corpus Christi, so I had some rhetorical resources for unconventional moments tucked away in my hip pocket. But when I walked into the cafeteria festooned with helium balloons, sprinkled with a handful of uninterested students who were clearly more engaged with each other, Fox News on the overhead TV monitors, and their green chili burritos, I knew I was in trouble. The Ronald McDonald play set in the corner for the resident day care program did not portend a rich pedagogical moment ahead. There have been a few times in my career that I wanted to slip out a bathroom window. This was one of those moments.

The student events coordinator directed me to a microphone at the front of the room. It didn’t work. I asked her to give me an introduction (expecting that she had prepared something form the CV and bio. I had sent to her in advance of my visit). She turned to me with an unsettling glazed look of confusion. None of the professional development programs of graduate school had prepared me for this. The coordinator quietly apologized for failing to prepare an introduction for me and asked me to just go up to the microphone and do my talk. She quickly ran to the back of the room with the three other teachers present and started eating a corn dog. I was waiting for Candid Camera’s Allen Funt or some tacky reality show host to burst out of the kitchen and tell me this was all just a ridiculous joke. But it was no joke. I started my talk, introducing myself and my topic, but I couldn’t see the students or their teachers through the veil of
helium balloons. It didn’t matter anyway, because no one could hear me over the Fox News Station. I stopped. I turned to a group of students gathered around a large cafeteria table and sat down with them. The student events coordinator looked horrified. And I just started talking with the half-dozen puzzled students nibbling on potato chips. Pretty soon a few more curious students joined us. Then a few teachers came to the table. I posed questions like “what does the term civil rights mean to you?” The events coordinator stood on the sidelines listening to the growing exchange between the students and me. Over an hour passed and the students, each thanked me generously and enthusiastically. They trickled away to go to class, to their jobs, and to pick up their children from day care. The events coordinator asked me to stay for lunch and I served myself a green chili burrito and lingered awhile with the three other teachers—until the janitors came and started vacuuming beneath our table. I burst out laughing with them, then threw my key note address in the trash can on the way out the door.

What are some of the implications of WACommunities for literacy education? Here is my imaginative fiction: I would like to institutionalize a statewide K-16 initiative for WACommunities to support and sustain civic, academic, professional, and cultural literacies across the state. I want a Community Writing Center in Albuquerque, a model inspired by the Salt Lake City Community Writing Center where children, college students, elderly, and even homeless citizens can find help writing and reading their own textual worlds. I have proposed the establishment of a writing fellows program for all colleges at UNM—we already have one effective writing fellow placed in the School of Business. And finally, I dream about establishing an Institute of Language and Literacy
at UNM to stimulate grant-funding research in language practices and literacy education throughout the Southwest. A modest proposal.

What the WACommunities initiative has revealed to me over the past five years is that our professional lives will invite us into unlikely partnerships, uncertain moments, and unexplainable stories. The rich rhetorical tradition of our field, the expansive interdisciplinarity of literacy and language studies, and the infinite connections embedded in Composition Studies invites us to reimagine our profession with each new cohort of graduate students. The capaciousness of our field preconditions our intellectual work toward partnership and collaboration. Cultivate your relationships with your peers, your colleagues, your students, your scholarship, and your communities. It is our relationships that awaken our souls and show us how to transform our labor into new gifts.

1“I sensation of Sight” Film (2008)
2 Keith Gilyard, Composition and Cornel West: Notes Toward a Deep Democracy citing Cornell West Democracy Matters cited in Gilyard 77).
4 I remain indebted to the support and leadership of our Graduate Assistant WAC Alliance leaders who have worked so diligently and generously over the past five years organizing WACommunities events and programs: Beverly Army Gillen, Leah Sneider, Bernadine Hernandez, Dan Cryer, and Greg Evans. It is not an exaggeration to say, we could not do this work without them.