With their collection of essays, Service Learning and Literary Studies in English, published by the Modern Language Association (MLA), Grobman and Rosenberg (2015) offer a compelling case for how the public humanities, particularly literary and writing studies, can engage students, faculty, and community members in important discussions about social justice, democracy, and the civic role of the academy through community-based learning. Given the difficult task of reviewing each article individually, I limit myself to the larger sections, evaluating one outstanding essay in each, then providing an overall assessment of the volume’s impact.

The lengthy, extensively researched introduction contextualizes the pedagogical and ideological history of community-based and service learning in literary studies. The editors define their theoretical terms well and outline the volume’s purpose clearly, which is to demonstrate how publically engaged literary and interdisciplinary studies can foster compassion and ethics (Grobman & Rosenberg, 2015, p. 16). The editors’ eight “Best Practices” at the end of the introduction provide practical yet essential advice for both novice and experienced practitioners of service learning in literary studies. The rest of the book is organized into five sections loosely by course or project content, with a “Selected Resources” section to end the volume.

Part I, “Service Learning in American Literature,” presents applications of undergraduate literature courses in public outreach, including two public library reading programs and multiple not-for-profit partners with a Native American-serving institution. Schweitzer’s essay, “Completing the Circle: Teaching Literature as Community-Based Learning,” stands out as a practical yet deep application of literary theory in a prison outreach program focusing on engaging marginalized voices, including poignant anecdotes from both prisoners and students.

Part II, “Service Learning in English and World Literature,” explores seemingly disparate topics in the context of community-based learning, including 18th century British literature and contemporary urban life in the United States, Shakespeare and social justice, Dickens and local landfills, and Latin American literature and language ideology. Hansen’s essay, “Shake It Up After-School: Service Learning, Shakespeare, and Performance as Interpretation” contains an excellent evaluation of student learning outcomes in relation to literary criticism, as well as a thoughtful discussion of the “depth vs. coverage” debate in literary studies. Rabin and Leeman’s essay on Latin American literature courses taught in Spanish is oddly placed in this volume, yet it is worth reading for how its experienced community engagement practitioners mesh varied texts and multiple community partners States and abroad.
Part III, “Service Learning in Creative Nonfiction and Memoir,” offers examples of community-based courses that engage students in producing memoir with retirees, hospice patients narrating their lives with and despite illness, and senior citizens in an in-home program writing creative nonfiction on issues such as identity, ethics, and heritage. Wagner’s essay, “Care, Compassion, and the Examined Life,” explores the limits of the seminal “with vs. for” issue in service learning pedagogy. She demonstrates how deliberately designing the experience to include both aspects led students to become more compassionate listeners, delve more deeply into the issues raised in the classroom, and better meet the needs of the community partner.

Part IV, “Service Learning in Literature-Based Writing,” includes an urban civic engagement course and a poetry workshop focused on social justice with mentally ill partners. Monpere McIsaac’s essay, “‘Beneath Thatched Shelters, We Paint Wide-Brimmed Hats’: Creative Writing and Social Justice,” embodies the challenges and rewards inherent in a partnership seeking reciprocity that explores the difficult issue of social justice through reading and writing poetry with community members who suffer from mental illness, including the emotional, ethical, and academic consequences. She skillfully weaves together poignant student and community poems with classroom activities, underscoring how poetry can be a catalyst not only for increased empathy, but also for social action.

Part V, “Service-Learning in Cross-Disciplinary Studies,” presents examples of interdisciplinary approaches to community engagement on topics such as classic literature, sexual violence, and food justice/environmentalism. Tyx and Vermillion’s essay, “Literature Goes to Prison: A Reciprocal Service-Learning Project,” exemplifies the reciprocal nature of extended partnerships, as well as solid pedagogical and ethical design in service learning through what they call the “shared vision” (p. 204) of the penitentiary staff with whom they worked in designing and implementing their Book Club project.

Part VI outlines selected resources in service learning teaching and scholarship, and would be extremely useful as a guide for researchers, administrators, and faculty, particularly for those new to the field. Resources include publication outlets (with the notable omission of this journal), conferences, professional organizations, media and print resources, and private and public agencies that support service learning teaching and research.

The brief essay format provides an easy-to-digest, effective presentation of a diversity of service learning projects in English and writing programs. The volume contains well-written, mostly anecdotal pedagogical approaches with some employing qualitative methodologies. Most essays focus on anecdotes or design from the university or student side and leave community partner outcomes or reciprocity aside. Moreover, those methodologists looking for data-driven qualitative approaches would not find this volume as useful. Some of the projects detailed in the essays use best practices that attempt reciprocity, shared decision-making, and reflection tying the academic content to the service components. However, several essays include short-term or drop-in service and are not as reflective from a pedagogical standpoint. That being said, these projects may be a good starting point for those faculty members looking to initiate basic community-based learning.

Overall, Service Learning and Literary Studies in English is a necessary addition to any English or literature department’s resource library, particularly for those discussing where to begin or how to improve existing community-based learning.
or service learning pedagogies in a variety of courses. It is a recommended addition to humanities departments in general as a guide for how to do public humanities through community engagement courses.

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