

Editors' Introduction

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We write this introduction for our fourth, coedited issue of *Reflections* at a historic moment between the passage of two articles of impeachment against President Donald Trump in the House and his possible (theoretical) removal in the Senate. This conjuncture comes just two months after the third Conference on Community Writing took place in Philadelphia in October. As coeditors of one of two affiliate journals of the Coalition on Community Writing, we had eagerly anticipated the conference and commissioned an article to review the conference as a way to take the pulse of community writing on the cusp of the 2020s (see Hubrig et al. in this issue). We cannot help noting—at the conference and in this Fall-Winter 2019-2020 issue of *Reflections*—that the work of community-engaged writing and rhetoric both exposes paths to justice in ways that distinguish it from many other disciplines and reproduces the same inequities that pervade life in and

out of the academy. In other words, our small but growing field is rife with both possibilities and limitations.

The articles in this issue use multiple methods from surveys, interviews, and case studies to participant ethnography, and from assessment of student learning outcomes to expanded assessment of community writing outcomes, instructors, and community partners. The issue not only includes archival research and the work of historical recovery but also the construction of new archives to capture today's tragedies, like the Flint, Michigan water crisis and the Boston Marathon bombing, providing a window into the processes by which silencing—sometimes but not always inadvertent—occurs. Among the nine articles, one course profile, and one personal essay, six include community-engaged writing pedagogies and critical service learning. These courses range from internships to a linked first-year writing and senior capstone course to professional writing. The projects demonstrate the imaginative, creative, and impactful work that can positively benefit all program participants and the communities we represent.

Two critical service-learning articles by Chris Iverson and coauthors Laurie Pinkert and Kendall Leon, respectively, focus on assessment in service-learning courses and first year writing. In “The Long-Term Effects of Service-Learning on Composition Students,” Iverson offers case studies of three former students who participated in a larger study he conducted at the University of Connecticut to determine the long-term effects of their experience. Although the students’ recollections differ from one another, they overlap in “their awareness of rhetoric as social, their commitment to effecting community change, and their belief that the service-learning experience affected them in subtle ways that nonetheless influenced their approaches to community action” (11).

In “Heuristic Tracing and Habits for Learning: Developing Generative Strategies for Understanding Service Learning,” Pinkert and Leon focus on what they call “heuristic tracing, a generative assessment strategy” that accounts for the fluidity and dynamism of university-community partnerships in ways that fill the acknowledged gap between service-learning’s impacts and writing programs’ traditional

assessment measures (38). Through their study at a large public land grant university of a new advanced composition offering with a required service learning component, they conclude that extending heuristic tracing to community partners may enable participants to position “assessment as an opportunity for collaborative, programmatic learning and change” and to better understand how community expectations for writing align with or diverge from their program’s aims (60).

This issue’s articles also employ multiple theoretical perspectives that open new ways of seeing and re-seeing. First, in “The Muted Group Video Project: Amplifying the Voices of Latinx Immigrant Students,” Christine Martorana borrows Muted Group Theory from the field of communications to help her Latinx and immigrant students understand why their voices about themselves and their communities are so vital. Martorana’s twenty-four college students, twenty-two of whom identified as Hispanic, created video messages for a local third grade class predominantly made up of immigrant students. Martorana writes: “Put simply, as our exploration of media depictions revealed, the stories told *about* immigrants were rarely told *by* them” (68). It was the power of her students’ first-hand knowledge—their “complete and real stories”—that led her to invite them to reflect on their own personal experiences and create videos for the third-grade Hispanic students that would enable both groups of learners to see their own “culture and language as valid and valuable sources of knowledge” (66).

Next, Brent Lucia takes us on a rhetorical and literal walk through Jamaica, Queens, in “Walking in Jamaica: Exploring the Boundaries and Bridges of Rhetorical Agency.” Drawing on Jeff Rice’s theories about networked spaces, Lucia suggests that rhetorical agents, while attentive to their own positionalities, may intervene in distorted and dominant narratives that re-inscribe marginalization. While teaching as an adjunct instructor in Jamaica at York College CUNY, Lucia witnessed the dichotomy between the dominant narrative of “promising stories of construction and revitalization through new development” circulating about this city (84) and the more complex, varied experiences he encountered there. He describes a recent walk through Jamaica’s streets, reflective of the city’s landscape and

history as well as his own positionality, and concludes, “improving our rhetorical awareness then means being sensitive to this fundamental dissonance between what we see and feel in our material worlds and what lives in our prevailing discourse” (84).

Then, in “Public Art as Social Infrastructure: Methods and Materials for Social Action at Environmentally Contaminated Sites,” Jason Peters brings together theories of artistic method, democratic engagement, and publics to illuminate the mobilizing efforts of a public arts nonprofit promoting environmental awareness. Peters draws lessons about the “material dimensions of artistic method” (109) from the work of a small nonprofit organization, UPPArts, aimed at cultivating environmental awareness. The organization’s collaborative arts program engaged the local community in making “nonexpert” knowledge in response to the experience of living near a contaminated urban watershed. Using field research conducted during his work with UPPArts, Peters contends that its annual culminating event, a parade known as the Urban Pond Procession, helped mobilize the nonexpert knowledge of a “public” that could advocate for its right to environmental remediation and protection.

This issue as a whole emphasizes the important work of social justice. In their course profile, Jeffrey Gross and Alison A. Lukowski describe “Writing for Advocacy,” a pair of 2018 community-engaged writing courses responding to the urgent political moment facing their Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) students at Christian Brothers University (CBU). In an integrated first-year writing course and an upper-division English elective, students worked collaboratively on meaningful projects designed for public dissemination and presentation, resulting in “meet[ing] both institutional learning outcomes for effective writing and research as well as softer outcomes for socializing and professionalizing first-generation and DACA students” (131).

In another example of the work of social justice, Zosha Stuckey reports on her students who research, write, submit, and track grants for small, community non-profit organizations (NPOs) and have raised over \$229,000 going directly to their NPO partners. Viewing equity as way to “return stolen resources” (Marcus and Munoz 2018),

she describes a community writing project at Towson University in the Baltimore metro area involving students as grant writers and grant trackers for small, resource-poor grassroots nonprofits (NPOs). Though proud of the program's success, she also has concerns about the ethical implications of working through systems of oppression embedded in the "Non-Profit Industrial Complex" and calls on writing teachers and programs to take up grant writing in a way that "acknowledges the legacies of injustice in our communities, places students of color in leadership roles, and prioritizes work with under-resourced organizations that are led by folks *from* the community itself" (142).

Both at the CCW and in the pages of this issue, the field of community engaged writing and rhetoric continues its focus on reciprocity and undoing complex, traditional university-community hierarchical relationships. Yet we also see how complicated and even intractable this work can be. As Lara Smith-Sitton and Brody Smithwick make clear in their article about a jail writing partnership with a nonprofit called Lion Life Community, "when those who are struggling the most in our communities are lifted up, empowered, and given a voice, everyone benefits... [but] [i]f inmates are released only to be forever stigmatized as 'the other,' then Lion Life's impact stays confined to the jail" (190). Similarly, in "#BostonStrong/BostonStrong?" Kristi Girdharry notes that the very act of creating her digital archive of stories and artifacts shortly after the Boston Marathon bombing on April 15, 2013, may itself have inadvertently silenced people. Despite following a motto of "no story too small" in order to be inclusive, Girdharry concludes, "in Our Marathon's aim to represent communities affected by the marathon bombings, the archive also created a community of its own—one that we now see may have unintentionally silenced people" (203).

Also reporting on a digital archive chronicling activist intervention, Julie Collins Bates notes that in the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, "black and working-class community activists joined together to test their own contaminated water, to protest, to distribute bottled water, and to fight for clean water for all Flint residents" (210). However, despite multiracial, working class coalition-building that was "vital to bringing attention to the Flint water crisis [,...] ... in national

mainstream media coverage of the crisis, it was mostly a group of white Americans ... who were identified as the 'heroes' of the water crisis" (210-11). Like Peters, Bates addresses environmental injustice. While these injustices and many others like them precede the Trump era, they also highlight how much Trump's deregulation of environmental protections and greedy rejection of climate change exacerbate these issues and make them more urgent for community-engaged writing and rhetoric to participate in countering.

We believe you will see in these articles and essays the authors *doing the work while in the job*. This work, along with the job and the hustle, was the subject of Carmen Kynard's keynote address at CCW 2019. It is also the focus of Adam Hubrig, Heather Lindenman, Justin Lohr, and Rachael Wendler Shah's reflections on the conference in "The Work of the Conference on Community Writing." Weaving together their own and other conference participants' voices into a polyvocal representation of the third biannual meeting of the Coalition for Community Writing, Hubrig et al. argue that "carefully attending to differences in positionalities must guide our approach to understanding CCW and imagining the future work of the field" (243). Collectively, they ask what would happen if "we gave full voice" to the narrative of "frequently omit[ted] ... material realities that shape the work and mediate our relationship to it. Our bodies, our commitments, our efforts just to pay for any of this to happen—these are defining features of our lives and our work, but function in our scholarship as an absent parallel narrative" (254).

In other words, perhaps because of its rootedness in social and economic justice activism, the work of community-engaged writing enables us to come to terms with the material realities that shape and constrain the work we do. For it is in so doing that we can understand, to paraphrase Marx and Engels, that though we make our own history, we can never make it just as we please. The change we produce in community writing—or in any scholarly or community-based project—may be more incremental than transformational, but this work must continue and deepen. We must recognize the limits of what we've accomplished and the urgent need to do more and to do better, embracing and cultivating the knowledge, talents, and skills of our students, community partners, community members,

and ourselves. Thus, as one example, as we see even in this issue, despite the activist-oriented, transformational pedagogies and impact on the third graders with whom the college students worked in Martorana's use of Muted Group Theory and Gross and Lukowski's DACA advocacy project, Latinx students' status in the United States remains perilous. We are clearly a long way from protecting DACA and other immigrant students, or closing the huge achievement gap for Latinx Americans, who are half as likely to hold a college degree as non-Hispanic white adults, just as we are clearly a long way from solving the multiple crises of ecology, economy, and democracy unfolding in this era.

In our initial call for submissions in 2017 after assuming the editorship of *Reflections*, we sought and hoped for submissions that would speak directly to the exigencies of the Trump era, then just beginning. Since then, the intensification of attacks on people of color, especially black people, Muslims, Jews, and immigrants, including the detention and deaths of children at the U.S.-Mexican border; the rise of white supremacist, nationalist movements; ever more visible, widespread sexual abuse; and the accelerating degradation of nature has also radicalized new layers of society, bringing hundreds of thousands of people onto the streets demanding democracy here and even more dramatically abroad, from Spain to Iraq to Chile to Hong Kong. In our 2017 call, our impulse was to encourage community-engaged scholars to draw out the connections between the local and the global, the work of writing and rhetoric and that of broader social and economic justice movements, and to capture the depth and breadth of activist responses to the crises of our time—all of which Trump's election and immediate anti-Muslim, racist, misogynistic, anti-democratic rhetoric and actions accentuated.

Interestingly, the response to the call was negligible. A few articles resonated with the sense of urgency we all felt in the aftermath of the 2016 elections, but most of the manuscripts we read, though reflective of interesting, important aspects of this emerging subfield, were unrelated to the call. Nor did they take up the entrenched, seemingly intractable socioeconomic and cultural fallout of world history that

long preceded Trump's election—what Mary Louise Pratt (1991) called *contact zones* in which “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths” (34). On the one hand, as coeditors of *Reflections*, we have come to more clearly see the limits of community-engaged writing and the many factors that constrain the nature and scope of projects with community partners and communities. On the other, for ourselves and for the field, we believe we must all become more critically conscious of geographical and thematic intersections—across social differences and sectors—and make and enact connections between local projects involving language, literacy, and cultural rhetorics and larger regional, national, and global issues. For, difficult and incremental though it is, the work of community writing contributes to the process of social change we all agree must develop and accelerate to solve the local and global crises we face as we enter the 2020s.

Finally, as editors of *Reflections* and panelists at the editors' roundtable at CCW, we applaud the deep commitment of our fellow editors to ensuring the publication of more inclusive, diverse journals and book series. Simply the number of new journals like *Spark*, *constellations*, *Latinx Writing and Rhetoric*, *enculturation*, and now, *Rhetoric, Politics, and Culture*, to be edited by Carmen Kynard and Bryan J. McCann, bodes well for theses evolving practices. We look forward to continuing, increasingly in-depth conversations about editorship that concretely examine issues of inclusivity, representation, and publication practices as they emerge in editorial work.

REFERENCES

Pratt, Mary Louise. 1991. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession*: 33-40.

NOTES

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