

Reflections' 20th Anniversary Roundtable:

What Was, What Is, What's Coming

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In our call for submissions for the Reflections' 20th anniversary issue, we invited shorter considerations about the journal's impact to be published as a textual roundtable. As is usually the case, we got what we asked for: a number of short pieces that praise, situate, look backward in order to predict going forward, illuminate, and otherwise comment on the journal's history, contributions to the field, weaknesses, and strengths. Below are several of these commentaries in conversation with one another. Together, they provide a glimpse into the journal's past and begin to imagine its future.

REFLECTIONS AS A RADICAL SITE FOR COMMUNITY-INFUSED KNOWING

Tobi Jacobi, Colorado State University

A couple of weeks ago, my eight-year-old came home with stories of a mysterious natural phenomena spilling from his lips: large boulders moving across the desert on their own volition, creating pathways and trails without

human intervention. The “sailing stones” of Death Valley had long captivated the citizen and sanctioned scientist alike as they carved pathways that we couldn’t explain into the California desert floor. While this mystery was answered by research conducted in 2013 and via Google for my son and me, the nature of the mystery stays with me: movements that seem deliberate, directional, explanations just barely visible, here pressing science and art to speculate on the thin and vital layers of seasonal ice that lift and push something new into existence. In its first decade, *Reflections* seemed to operate similarly, moving steadily, stealthily into the entrenched world of writing studies with deliberate movements in myriad directions, allowing the emergent blend of community-based work to amaze, inspire, and provoke scholars into new through lines of inquiry.

Reflections called into being a place for community within our field. It highlighted through interviews, book reviews, and feature essays the work being done in the complex spaces writing occupies across campus borders and into third spaces. It valued, welcomed even, the networks and research opportunities created by community-university partnerships. It gave space to graduate students and emerging assistant professors as well as validation to those who had been working for years to recognize a space for community-infused writing work alongside mainstream composition studies. Each editor—Bacon/Roswell—Kirklighter—Parks—and Mutnick/Grobman added significantly to the shape and transformation of the work of community/writing intersections, including interviews with prominent and rising scholars, innovative collaborations, and calls for accountability across language and stakeholders. Essays from the journal have frequently been included in the Best of the Journals in Rhetoric and Composition anthologies published by Parlor Press.

I keep my print collection of *Reflections* in a prominent place in my university office, a jagged row of journals that embody a commitment to respond, to morph, and to grow as each editorial team brought a vision to the evolving needs of our community. Their mentoring and commitments have propelled the journal into its current position as sanctuary, resource, provocateur, community, and home for many scholars. The volumes are positioned deliberately at eye level, ready to grab off the shelf, to lend, to highlight, to encourage students

and colleagues toward an understanding of what research methods, projects, and publications developed through community engagement might enable. This set of texts brings me hope for a more socially just and equitable world, one where many voices are heard, valued, and embraced. We are sailing stones ready to push ahead when conditions are right, claiming space on conference programs, in university press announcements, and within curricular mappings.

HONORING A JOURNAL AND ITS EDITORS AS THEY HONOR ITS READERS, ITS CONTRIBUTORS, AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

Isabel Baca, University of Texas at El Paso

Inclusive. That's how I would define and describe the journal, *Reflections*, as it celebrates its 20th Anniversary. This journal has become a literary home for me as a community-engaged scholar and educator. It welcomed me in 2007 and, since then, it has paved the way for community-engaged writing and rhetoric, creating a space for social justice and activism in academia.

In 2007, I had my first experience with the journal *Reflections: Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing, and Service Learning*, now titled *Reflections: A Journal of Community-Engaged Writing and Rhetoric*. Adrian Wurr was guest editing a special issue on exploring diversity in community-based writing and literacy programs; my article, "Exploring Diversity, Borders, and Student Identities: A Bilingual Service-Learning Workplace Writing Approach," was accepted and published. It was at that time that I realized the opportunities this journal brings to marginalized scholars and educators. This special issue and the journal's focus on public rhetoric, civic writing, and service learning brought my research interests together and encouraged me to continue my scholarship. At a time of self-doubt and serious impostor syndrome, *Reflections* reassured me that I belong.

In my years (2005-2012) as an assistant professor of English at a Hispanic-serving institution, I was alone in my department as I pursued a research agenda focusing on service-learning in writing studies. Though the university had its own Center for Civic Engagement, I did not find much support within my department. I

was isolated and questioning my own work. *Reflections* rescued me. *Reflections* opened the doors for me and reinforced my scholarship: Public rhetoric, civic writing, and SERVICE-LEARNING matter, both within and outside the field of Rhetoric and Composition.

As a service-learning advocate and practitioner, I believe in community outreach and engagement. When higher education and the community become equal stakeholders, both students' education and the community benefit in many ways. *Reflections* has emphasized the importance of community in our work. *Reflections* values community voices, including voices from the marginalized. Recognizing and valuing these voices have strengthened me inside and outside academia. As a Latina scholar, and one who honors and values community, I thank *Reflections* and its editors for being trailblazers for community-based writing and community projects in rhetoric and composition, and for recognizing that our field is very much connected to community.

In 2013, when I guest co-edited, along with Cristina Kirklighter, the special issue on Latinxs in public rhetoric, civic writing, and service-learning, I worked with extraordinary contributors that taught me and showed me how Latinxs make change and work hard to bring about social justice through art, community engagement, education, and activism. Quoting Cesar Chávez in our introduction to this special issue, Cristina and I emphasized how our gente, Latinxs, contribute to community and fight for social justice through our work. So we quoted Cesar Chávez, "You should know that the education of the heart is very important. This will distinguish you from others. Educating oneself is easy, but educating ourselves to help other human beings to help the community is much more difficult." I believe *Reflections* and its editors are committed to exactly this: to help scholars see the importance of not only doing this ourselves but also teaching others the importance of community engagement, outreach, social responsibility, and social justice.

Since 2007, I have worked with the different journal editors (Cristina Kirklighter, Steve Parks, and now Laurie Grobman and Deborah Mutnick). With these transitions, the journal's focus has evolved more and more by showing the importance of honoring, valuing, and

recognizing the contributions by different communities, particularly communities of color and those who are marginalized. In addition, by making the journal an open access resource, the editors are contributing to a more just and equitable way of making scholarship accessible. Thus, I have found a home in *Reflections*, a home that promotes inclusivity and respect. For the journal and its editors, inclusivity and respect are not just jargon, but a genuine practice, a practice that needs to grow in the fields of rhetoric, writing studies, and literacy.

With its issues focusing on themes such as prison writing, reproductive justice, community justice, resistance, and sustainability, *Reflections* emphasizes our field's concern for, or should I say our field's obligation to strive for, social justice in and outside academia. Social justice comes in many forms: racial, linguistic, cultural, economic, educational, political, medical, etc. *Reflections* provides a venue for scholars to address social (in)justice(s) and describe community-based projects that revolve around the field of rhetoric and writing studies with a focus on the public, on community. It is time for change, and *Reflections* stands as an exemplar to all other journals in the fields.

REFLECTIONS ON SEEING WHAT'S COMING

Tom Deans, University of Connecticut

Twenty years ago, almost no one in composition studies was talking about transfer, although Nora Bacon, a founding editor of *Reflections*, was writing about it, prompted by her experiences teaching and researching first-year students writing for community organizations. At that time, in the mid and late 1990s, taking up transfer of knowledge or competencies as a research priority was out of sorts with then-dominant understandings of critical pedagogy and cultural studies. While transfer had a secure presence in educational research, in rhetoric and composition it was perceived as aligning too much the cognitive paradigm that James Berlin and others had tagged as positivistic and apolitical. Bacon's emphasis on transfer went against the grain, just as I think this journal's founding, while indebted to critical pedagogies, cut against the grain of then-prevailing versions of them, which tended to be long on critique but short on application.

Part of Bacon's effort to explain the dynamics of transfer included coining a student-centered version of the term "theory of writing," which she defined as "a writer's conception of what writing is and what it is for" (Bacon 1999, 58). Working from her empirical study of students in service-learning courses, she analyzed how a student's working theory of writing—among a number of other variables, including rhetorical awareness, writing knowledge, motivation, learning strategies, identity as learner—promoted or impeded writing performance in school or community, as well as transfer across them.

Today, talk of transfer is everywhere in writing studies, and most associate the term "theory of writing" with Kathleen Blake Yancey, Lianne Robertson, and Karen Taczak's 2014 *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*. Those authors arrived at the term independently, and define it somewhat differently as the "student's definition of writing emerging from explicitly developed knowledge about writing (as articulated through the key terms of the course, e.g., genre, discourse community, context) and from their own experiences in the course and often beyond the course" (Kathleen Blake Yancey, personal email communication, January 8, 2020). Bacon's "theory of writing," framed more as implicit than explicit, may be closer to what Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak call the student writer's "point of departure." But parsing terms is not what I'm after here. Instead, I want to propose that the early service-learning advocates, many of them pivotal to founding *Reflections*, were prescient in valuing a cluster of then-marginal concepts—like attending to how the theories of writing that students carry with them influence transfer across contexts—that would, about a decade later, become mainstream in writing studies.

Another case in point: twenty years ago, no one was using the term "writing about writing" (WAW). David Russell had introduced the idea (though not that phrasing) in 1995, but the signature article on WAW by Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle did not appear until 2007, and their textbook/reader not until 2011. However, WAW-like pedagogy was emergent among many early service-learning practitioners and theorists. The materiality of having novice writers compose in workplace and civic genres forced us to confront the very

nature of writing in ways that typical classroom genres, practices, and exigencies did not. For example, some chapters of my 2003 *Writing and Community Action: A Service-Learning Rhetoric and Reader* mirror that approach and even reprint some of the very same readings we now see in writing-about-writing anthologies. I was just trying to give students concepts and strategies for navigating the dual demands of academic and community writing. Several articles in the early issues of *Reflections* hew to this same habit of drawing attention to the utility composition theory—and the value of explicitly teaching students such theory—to help make sense of the contradictions of writing at once within and beyond the university (Chaden et al. 2002; Chappell 2005; Gabor 2006). I could point to other patterns of prescience, such as how *Reflections* readers, writers, and editors have prioritized circulation from the start—though rarely calling it that or drawing special attention to it—long before that became a hot term in writing studies.

I suppose I'm waving my hands and saying "Hey, we were there first!" on some important disciplinary trends, but the more telling upshot, I think, is that when you're deliberately working on the edges of the academy and bringing students there with you, you're bound to more immediately face the press of how the larger culture is negotiating writing and social action. This means that there's good reason to believe that *Reflections* will continue to be prescient about what counts as writing and which theories can help us make sense of it.

MUSINGS ON SERVING AS THE *REFLECTIONS* BOOK EDITOR

Tom Deans, *University of Connecticut*

Tobi Jacobi, *Colorado State University*

Soon after *Reflections* transitioned from newsletter to peer-reviewed journal, it established a book review section. For the first four years, Tom Deans served as book review editor; for the next five, it was Tobi Jacobi. The current review editor is Romeo Garcia.

Tom: When seeking out reviewers, I always tried to balance early career folks with senior scholars. The widely known figures were generous, ever quick to say "yes," and their work appeared right alongside many who were seeing their first publication come into

print. That, to me, felt right for the ethos of a young journal establishing itself as both rigorous and inclusive, as wanting to insist that we need something of a shared knowledge base but also new energy and fresh perspectives.

Tobi: I look back on my time as editor with mixed emotions. I collected books from key presses, reached out to prospective reviewers via listservs, conference sign-ups, and emails to key scholars with rising graduate students. I privileged graduate student reviewers, remembering my own experiences, lectures about how and when to publish. I stood at tables, passed out copies of prospective review texts, developed guidelines, and edited lightly. I worked with special issue editors to find the books that would most intrigue and delight their readers. I invited junior colleagues and students of my own who feigned interest.

Tom: When it came to the actual back-and-forth of editing, I found myself pretty heavy-handed, maybe prioritizing consistency over creativity! Thinking that readers expected brief and brisk reviews, I pushed for compression. Lots of crossing out. With the graduate students, I often tried to unschool their prose and have them speed up the summary sections; at the same time, I wanted them to speak with confidence and a point of view. I occasionally worried that all our reviews were so nice, so affirming, but then would check that impulse—we were trying to build something here.

Tobi: Surely there were books I missed, community texts I could have highlighted, my own failure to resist a culture of busyness and “never-quite-enough” infiltrating my ability to be set and reach the goals I might have set for a book editor who privileged community, reciprocity, and non-traditional texts. It is that last part where I have twinges of regret, wishing I had made space to bring more community-based texts into the journal—and then I wonder if this is even a desire. Do community-based writers want review space for their publications in academic journals? Might such space improve circulation or energize material resources and/or human capacities? Would displacing a potential academic text with a collaborative, community, or experimental book advance work toward language-based justice? Economic equity? Would it privilege community

labor, or would such attention likely advance only university partners? These are some of the questions that linger as I reflect upon the work of editing book reviews across over a dozen issues of *Reflections* and imagine future issues curated by current and future editorial guidance.

MAKING SPACE FOR RESEARCH ON PRISON WRITING, LITERACY, AND TEACHING

Tobi Jacobi, Colorado State University

Essays begging educational programming. Love letters. Poems about children. Poems praising god. Flash fictions of absence. Snapshots of abuse, painful to write, painful to read. Longings for grass, for sunlight. More essays begging programs, classes, anything beyond the stale GED curriculum. Requests for books. Complaints, thinly veiled against staff, officers, bunkmates, the system. Scribbles, nonsense, anything, words just to prove one exists. Epistles about the treatment of prisoners. On and on—they kept arriving long after the deadline for the 2004 *Reflections* special issue on prison literacy and writing had passed. When Patricia O'Connor, Barbara Roswell, and I worked to curate that first special issue, we knew something special was happening. We were flooded by submissions from all over the United States, my office shelves stacked high with the government-issue, pre-stamped envelopes available from prison commissaries.

Sixteen years later, it remains difficult to let go of those writings, the carefully penned hopefulness, so clear in lined pages, that a writer could be recognized, valued, and seen beyond prison walls. So, I honor their space in my university office, and every few years I tell myself it is time to let them go. I know this is the rational thing to do, but recycling those pages also feels like letting go of an important beginning, one of the edges of the scholar-activist that so many community writers have helped me to become. Those submissions—even those we couldn't print—propelled me deeper into a subfield I hardly knew existed.

In the 1990s, scholarship on prison literacy and education was scattered across the fields of adult education, sociology, criminology,

philosophy, and women's studies; by the early 2000s community literacy studies was gaining recognition within rhetoric and composition—and prison literacy and writing studies were emerging along with it. The special issue in *Reflections* allowed teacher-scholar-activists (now known as engaged scholars) space to extend writing theory and pedagogy behind bars and to grapple with the complexity, discomfort, and complicities of working with and within often repressive carceral institutions. This is one of the great strengths of *Reflections*: its commitment to bringing into conversation contexts and spaces of writing that are vexed, invisible, relegated to the margins.

When Wendy Hinshaw and I issued the call for a second special issue on prison work more than a decade later, we understood that the landscape had deepened, that the scholarship extended, critiqued, and sometimes corrected those early efforts. We received many more submissions from outside academics and far fewer from currently incarcerated writer-scholars. The outside academics were eager to reflect, report, critique, and interrogate. The inside writers offered testimony, argument, and reflection through short essays, narratives, and poetry. It is difficult to know with certainty how to account for the disparity in submission sources. On one hand, I celebrate the increased attention to carceral education by rhetoricians and literacy scholars; at the same time, I worry about increased repression of the freedom of speech, the circulation limitations that inside writers face in the name of security, our failure to advance writing and expression as a universal human right. *Reflections* created the space to engage those conversations and bring those active, shifting critical concerns into larger dialogues on the role and potential of community literacy work as cross-disciplinary urgencies.

THE JOURNAL BEHIND THE CURTAIN: REFLECTIONS ON THE REFLECTIONS ARCHIVE

Heather Lang, Susquehanna University

In the fall of 2018, co-editors Laurie Grobman and Deborah Mutnick invited me to join the *Reflections* team as a web manager and editor. Simply, this appointment was meant to support the editors' goal of transitioning out of a subscription-based publishing model and

into an open-access publishing model. Additionally, the editors also sought to add Creative Commons licensing to as much content as possible. At that time, the editorial team, with the guidance of the Penn State Libraries, began the enormous task of contacting writers, updating permissions, and optimizing PDF files of 19 volumes of content.

As the migration continued, I noticed more difficulties in making *Reflections* content publicly available, namely its limited circulation. The archive was not search engine friendly, and after nearly two decades of grassroots publication, most content had not been indexed on any search engines, such as Google or Bing, or any database (though some content had been annotated in CompPile). In effect, the content was shrouded by a heavy digital curtain. So, I, along with assistant editors, Katelyn Lusher, a PhD student at the University of Cincinnati, and Gabriela Rubino, an undergraduate at Susquehanna University, devised a plan for making the archive more easily accessible to readers and to search engines. This added to our migration the labor-intensive task of providing metadata for every piece published on the website. Now, as we near the end of the migration, we can trace how one, or sometimes two or all three, of us has interacted with every piece of *Reflections* content—each journal article has been marked with copyright permissions, uploaded to the *Reflections* archive, indexed on our website, registered for a Direct Object Identifier, and submitted for inclusion in CompPile.

As I look back on this deep dive into the *Reflections* archive, I'm left with three observations: first, I observed that *Reflections* constitutes a living history of the field and the United States. In many ways, the archive picks up where histories of the field of composition end, reveals volumes that react to, process, and theorize major events and movements in the U.S. over the last two decades, and illustrates the ways that the field has evolved to invite community and student collaboration beyond the classroom. Indeed, Tobi Jacobi notes, some of *Reflections*' most valuable contributions to the field omit the classroom altogether to focus on other sites of writing and rhetoric, such as prisons, while still other issues focus on Veterans Affairs offices, after-school programs, post-Katrina New Orleans, community organizations, and museums, to name a few. Moreover, as

an independent journal, *Reflections* has maintained an agile editorial structure that enables writers and editors to respond to national events—the events that make a nation and shape its culture—and community spaces—those nonacademic sites of writing and rhetoric—in a timely and thoughtful fashion.

In this way, *Reflections* not only makes good on its mission to support teachers, scholars, and activists engaging with public rhetoric by tethering its content to current events, but also further demonstrates the connection between what we do in our research or teaching and the impact we can make on the world around us, if and when we choose to make it. The *Reflections* archive demonstrates that rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies are linked to the world, and also models how we might make positive interventions in the world—many of which remain relevant—by addressing the ways that compositionists can respond to the need to foster non-violence, address violence against women, challenge racism and homophobia, and foster diversity in our academic and non-academic lives and communities.

Second, *Reflections'* history of publishing non-academic genres alongside academic genres demonstrates an expansive understanding of scholarly community and the ways that the journal can support research, broadly construed. It is axiomatic that a scholarly journal supports a scholarly community and, as a result of that connection, its genres instantiate that community's values; simply put, the generic forms of a journal dictate what is, and is not, a field's body of knowledge. Many academic fields have been limited by and criticized for their veneration of the academic article and their disregard for artistic, workplace, practical, and everyday genres. Too, this generic restriction is particularly problematic for the exploration of public and civic writing, in which many potential writers compose outside of academic institutions. In addressing this tension, *Reflections* has published scholarly articles, critiques, interviews, and reviews alongside visual art, such as photographs and sketches, poetry, narrative essays, reflective essays, lesson plans, and community action documents. Works composed by students, people experiencing incarceration, veterans, lovers, immigrants, community organizers, activists, and undergraduate students appear alongside emerging and

prominent scholars in the field. Moving beyond the scholarly article and making room for a wide variety of genres challenges traditional notions of who might be included in a research community and expands our notions of what might count as evidence, knowledge, or data. In this way, *Reflections* stands as a powerful example of how compositionists might make their research more accessible to the field as well as to the communities that contribute to, collaborate in, or benefit from our research.

Finally, I observe that *Reflections'* impact on the field is limited by its previously limited circulation. Throughout its history, *Reflections* has addressed difficult and pressing topics (see, for instance, Tom Deans' previous comments on teaching-for-transfer and writing-about-writing pedagogies), but much of this excellent work has been missed as a result of its limited circulation. Because *Reflections* has not been indexed or optimized for search engines, its visibility and availability have been significantly limited. It is also difficult to quantify via the number of citations the impact the journal has made on subsequent scholarship. Though I don't mean to imply that quantification, citation, or indexing are the best measures of the success of research-driven projects, I believe *Reflections* is uniquely positioned to provoke and continue conversations focused on social justice, but that potential cannot be realized without engaging the more open circulatory networks. Too, making the work of the journal visible in and beyond the field is a laborious endeavor. Though the digital editorial team has begun to push aside the curtain, sharing the work of *Reflections*, and maintaining and updating the digital archive as ideas, content, and platforms continue to change, is a long-term endeavor. It is my hope that our efforts in this area will increase the reach of *Reflections* so that the journal might more fully realize its goals of promoting civically-engaged writing and rhetorical practice.

In all these ways, *Reflections* provides an example of how scholars, activists, students, community organizers, and citizens can come together to make and share knowledge that can make positive impacts in our world. The journal's editorial agility in focusing on current events demonstrates the important ways that researchers can engage with communities, rather than hiding away in the Ivory Tower. Its generic diversity asks important questions about what is and

is not legitimate research or scholarship and makes permeable the sometimes-exclusive boundaries of research communities. Further, *Reflections*' new commitment to open access publishing also makes it possible to establish a broader reading and writing community with a variety of stakeholders. After indexing twenty years of *Reflections* content, I believe we need *Reflections* and its community now more than ever, and I hope to see *Reflections* emerge from behind its curtain as a field leader for promoting social change.

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Tobi Jacobi is Professor of English and director of the University Composition Program and the Community Literacy Center at Colorado State University. She coordinates the SpeakOut! Writing Workshop Program for community writers working from spaces of confinement and recovery. Her scholarship on prison literacy and community writing appears in journals such as *Reflections*, *Community Literacy Journal*, *The Journal of Correctional Education*, *Feminist Formations*, and *Radical Teacher* and in edited collections. Her co-edited book *Women, Writing, and Prison* came out in 2014, and she is currently working on a collaborative literacy remix project that blends contemporary pedagogy with archival prison texts.

Tom Deans is Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center at the University of Connecticut, where he also leads pedagogy workshops for faculty and graduate assistants across the disciplines, as well as at UConn Health. He was involved in the early days of *Reflections*, and during those years wrote *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition* and *Writing and Community Engagement: A Service-Learning Rhetoric and Reader*. Now he does most of his community-oriented work through writing center collaborations with secondary schools. Other interests include writing across the curriculum, undergraduate research, the history of literacy, writing assessment, prose style, and representations of writers in literary and sacred texts.

Heather Lang is an Assistant Professor of English and Creative Writing and Writing Coordinator at Susquehanna University, where she directs the Common Reading Program. Heather currently serves as the *Reflections* web editor and works with an undergraduate student editor, Gabriella Rubino, as part of the Publishing and Editing Program at Susquehanna University. Heather's research interests include hashtag movements, digital writing and publishing, and diverse embodiment. Heather's work has appeared in the journal *Computers and Composition* and in the edited collection *Circulation, Writing, and Rhetoric*.

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