

Looking Back to Look Ahead:

Reflections Turns Twenty

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We are thrilled to introduce this 20th anniversary issue of *Reflections*. Our tenure as coeditors has taught us a great deal about the journal, the growing subfield of community-engaged writing, and the pleasures and pitfalls of editing a biannual publication. As we embarked on editing this issue, we assumed we would learn a lot about the journal's history, but we could not fully appreciate what that meant until we began to review submissions. The first round we got were in response to a call for articles directed mainly to those with a close association with the journal—former editors, contributors, board members, reviewers—or whose own career paths were influenced by reading it. These articles and several interviews, shorter pieces, and a dialogue provide valuable perspectives on the journal.

In addition to the personal perspectives offered by former editors, authors, and readers, two groups of scholars collaborated

to present retrospective appraisals of the journal, one focused on patterns, themes, genres, theories and methods uncovered by a close, critical analysis of its content, and the other on reader responses culled from a fifteen-question survey that tell us about its reception. This anniversary issue proceeds then from *Perspectives* to *Retrospectives* and, finally, to the ongoing work of *Reflections* with two regularly featured genres—a research article on adult learning in the community and a profile on an inclusive summer lunch literacy program—as well as the usual book reviews. In our own reflections on the material that emanated from calls for submissions and from the continuing impact of the journal, we see this issue as a way of looking back to look ahead.

On a more sober note, our celebration of the journal's 20th anniversary is tempered by intertwining crises in the U.S. and around the world. As we draft this introduction, the recent police and vigilante murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery have underscored, again, the deep, institutionalized racism in the United States and continued state violence against black people. Protests across this country and around the world erupted in what Keenanga-Yamahtta Taylor called a “class rebellion” against systemic failures of American democracy. This protracted, multiracial, international outcry is a hopeful sign of deepening mass struggle for racial and economic justice, even as it was met by White House threats to deploy the U.S. military to quell protests and “dominate the streets.” As members of multiple communities—our own neighborhoods, the places we teach, partnerships we strive to maintain, political, religious, artistic, and other groups to which we belong—we face more profound challenges and uncertainties than perhaps ever before: a global pandemic that has redefined life on the planet for the foreseeable future and a complex political and economic crisis that has both liberatory and fiercely repressive potential.

On the one hand, these crises illuminate the significance of community-engaged writing and rhetoric, resonating with *Reflections'* strong social justice ethos and appeal to activists, practitioners, theorists, and authors to cross academic and community boundaries. On the other, they remind us of the limitations of the work we do in these capacities, instruct us to engage with social movements that are

on the front lines of activist organizing, and call on us to apply those lessons to our own house. Systemic racism, rising levels of inequality, and intensifying police repression require us all to take responsibility for fighting ever more resolutely in professional as well as personal contexts for racial, economic, and gender justice. We write about the pandemic and the racial justice protests here to mark this moment and remind ourselves and our readers of how *Reflections*—perhaps more than most journals—chronicles the broader historical context in which it is published, and in anticipation of future issues of the journal that will grapple with the impact of these fraught times on all that we do.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

In part 1 of this issue, we begin with founding editor Barbara Roswell's recollections of the journal's history. Starting with a poignant description of a group of young scholars gathered in a large conference room to figure out how best to use a \$5000 grant for community-engaged writing, she goes on to invoke the early days of the journal and the process by which it grew from an 9 x 13 inch newsletter to a well-respected, influential, boundary-crossing publication. Making clear the founding editors' commitment to social justice and the amplification of community voices, she declares: "We recognized community-engaged work as a unique kind of praxis within a field characterized by praxis, and tried to promote an approach to scholarship and inquiry that honored the pragmatic without being theory-less or research-less" (17).

In "*Reflections'* 20th Anniversary Roundtable: What Was, What Is, What's Coming," Isabel Baca, Tom Deans, Tobi Jacobi, and Heather Lang write about the journal as "a home that promotes inclusivity and respect" (Baca, 29), "called into being a place for community within our field," and "created the space" for scholarship on pressing social justice issues like prison literacy (Jacobi, 25; 34). Tom Deans recalls the journal's focus two decades ago on topics like transfer and "writing about writing"—now ubiquitous in composition studies—as "prescient about what counts as writing and which theories can help us make sense of it" (31). *Reflections'* current web editor, Heather Lang, who has been archiving issues and creating abstracts for them, concludes that the journal "provides an example for how scholars,

activists, students, and community organizers, and citizens can come together to make and share knowledge that can make positive impacts in our world” (37).

We then hear again from Tom Deans in an interview conducted by Eric Mason, in which they return to themes from an interview with Deans in the very first issue of the journal to reflect on its history and impact since then. Deans concludes that “Our trajectory as a field has been, and continues to be, hopeful ... and projects like *Reflections* represent our long-term interest in finding the resources to make something more promising happen for the community and for our students” (49).

Next, Linda Flower, first interviewed by *Reflections* in fall of 2000, calls for a “consequential framework” that emphasizes the complementary, rather than conflictive, nature of different theoretical approaches to community-engaged writing in order to mobilize evidence of the impact of engaged learning on students. This need for evidence-based support for the value of community writing for college and high school students as well as community-based writers is ever more urgent in a period of economic contraction and austerity. In “The Consequences of Engaged Education: Building a Public Case,” Flower traces the evolution of approaches to community writing from service learning to community literacy to the public turn to more overtly political, local action, and concludes that an “inclusive perspective can lay the groundwork for a broader public case for engagement as an essential element in contemporary education” (59).

Former editor and ongoing promoter of the journal Steve Parks teams up in a dialogue with Brian Bailie, now an assistant professor of English, then a doctoral student at Syracuse University who served first as a graduate intern and then associate editor. Their aim as editors, they declare, was to ensure that “*Reflections* would continue to offer a broader critique to how the field was structured to try to break the discourse within composition and rhetoric that championed professionalization and disciplinarity” in order to remain true to the democratic values it so often invoked (69).

Echoing Flower's call for an "inclusive perspective" in somewhat different terms, Abbie Levesque DeCamp and Ellen Cushman argue that *Reflections* is well positioned with its more activist orientation than other academic journals to "truly address[ed] what the current formulation of 'community' as it currently stands may elide" (90-91). In "Intersectional Community Thinking: New Possibilities for Thinking about Community," the authors make a case for resisting "binary understandings" of community and embracing intersectionality "to unearth how discussions of power, senses of belonging, and erasures of intra-community difference within communities shape their writing practices" (91). To do so, they conclude, "can help to better express the experiences of multiply marginalized people, and to work toward empowerment through difference and collective liberation" (101).

In another interview, Shane Wood interviews Paul Mathieu, best known for her book *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition* and briefly a *Reflections* editor. In recalling the journal's history, Mathieu remarks that "you have to mention Barbara Roswell, who ... was *Reflections*." She goes on: "It was really the first place where I saw people doing work like what I was doing. I thought it was amazing" (113).

Finally in this section, in "Community Engagement for the Graduate Student Soul: Ruminations on *Reflections*," Ashanka Kumari, a relative newcomer to the journal, recalls her initial encounter with community writing at the Clyde Malone Community Center and Matt Talbot Kitchen and Outreach in Lincoln, Nebraska. This formative experience as a master's degree student "contributed to my growth as a teacher-scholar" (125). She also notes that *Reflections* "offers space to make oft-invisible and undervalued labor visible and valued" (126). Reva E. Sias rounds out part 1, recollecting her experience as a doctoral student at Syracuse University, where she served as a guest editor with Beverly Moss on a special issue on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Community Literacy Partnerships (Volume 10, Issue 2)—experiences, she concludes, that allowed her "to locate my editorial and intellectual self" (141).

RETROSPECTIVES

Part 2 of this issue includes two collaborative articles that offer retrospective analyses of *Reflections'* twenty years. Roger Chao, Deb Dimond Young, Johanna Phelps, David Stock, and Alex Wulff offer a critical reading and analysis of the journal's twenty years of articles, poems, book reviews, editors introductions, and calls for articles. They present in-depth analyses of the journal's history, methods, significance of non-traditional academic genres, the relationship between *Reflections* and first-year composition, and issues of power and privilege, "marking patterns and shifts in perspective, the ways that later issues complicated earlier issues" and "the ways that the journal has sometimes led and sometimes grappled with the wider field of Writing Studies" (148). Importantly, as the authors write, their "map of *Reflections*" (147) is one group's perspective—a map, not *the* map—of the journal. The authors conclude their deep dive into the journal by suggesting that *Reflections* "has shown a deep and abiding commitment to wrestling with issues of power and privilege in community-engaged writing and rhetoric," and that "[t]his twenty-year history should serve as a call for all readers to continue that work" (180).

In the second article in part 2, coauthors Noah Patton and Rachel Presley utilize Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch's method of "*strategic contemplation*" to analyze reader responses culled from a fifteen-question survey on memorable theories, methodologies, and perspectives, and their impact on readers' lives as students, as educators, as researchers, and as community citizens. Patton and Presley identify four prominent themes noted by respondents: inclusivity; challenge to power and privilege; innovative, transformative pedagogies; and boundary pushing. To understand the journal's impact on readers, Patton and Presley employ Jenny Edbauer's conceptualization of rhetorical ecologies to suggest that it's readership participates in "a mutually-constituted site of flux and transformation" (206). Participants emphasized the journal's "most vital contribution to the discipline: cultivating a space of inquiry that legitimizes and validates community-based writing in a multiplicity of forms" (207).

THE ONGOING WORK OF *REFLECTIONS*

Part 3, The Ongoing Work of *Reflections*, includes two regularly featured genres—a research article on adult learning in the community and a profile on an inclusive summer lunch literacy program—as well as the usual book reviews. Both “look back” to the discipline’s long commitment to community literacy programs, and “look forward” by sharing new models and extending disciplinary knowledge. In “A Curriculum of the Self: Students’ Experiences with Prescriptive Writing in Low and No-Cost Adult Education Programs,” Alison Turner analyzes interviews she conducted with instructors and students at six low or no-cost adult education programs, identifying differences in the ways instructors and students perceive the students’ writing experiences. Arguing that this study informs adult literacy programs, Turner offers “a concept called the ‘curriculum of the self’ to identify students’ use of prescriptive modes to enjoy and engage with writing” (215), highlighting how it speaks to other tensions in community literacy, such as “turbulent flow” and sustainable practices of reciprocity.

“More than a Sandwich: Developing an Inclusive Summer Lunch Literacy Program in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania,” coauthored by Laurie Cella, Michael Lyman, Liz Fisher, Sysha Irot, and Gabrielle Binando, profiles a Summer Lunch Program (SLP), sponsored by the Shippensburg Community Resource Coalition (SCRC), a collaboration between Shippensburg University and local community social service organizations, including the local library. Building on research on best practices, this SLP combines free lunch with fun activities and provides dynamic literacy programming in a camp-like program, and is open to all children of all socioeconomic statuses. The authors hope their profile “serves as a useful model to practitioners who are interested in replicating our work in other communities” because “[t]hese camp-like activities work to erase the stigma associated with a free Summer Lunch program with an emphasis on community rather than need” (247).

Part 3 ends with two timely book reviews. Charlotte Kupsh reviews *Writing Suburban Citizenship: Place Conscious Education and the Conundrum of Suburbia* (Syracuse UP, 2015), edited by Robert E. Brooke. Next, Brian McShane reviews *Writing Democracy: The*

Political Turn in and Beyond the Trump Era (Routledge 2020), coedited by Shannon Carter, Deborah Mutnick, Stephen Parks, and Jessica Pauszek.

Finally, returning to the reason for this special issue of *Reflections*, we note that if we were to pick a single, critical takeaway from what we have learned from the articles, interviews, and dialogues that follow, it is a reminder that the history of a journal is like any other history: though linear in some respects, it is also recursive, reiterative, and dialectical. There is no simple trajectory from 2000 to 2020 about which we can say, ah, this marks the development of the field, or upon which we can look back and boast that we have gone beyond the untheorized, uncritical approaches to community-engaged writing that our predecessors took back then. Instead, we see patterns of change that circle back, intersect, and reflect the discoveries of one theory of community writing or another in multiple, sometimes minor, sometimes transformative refractions of the field. We argue that the conflicts, tensions, or differences that surface in this interrogation of the journal's history are the productive debates that define us—and will continue to define us—as we move into *Reflections'* next twenty years.

REFERENCE

Taylor, Keenanga-Yamahtta. 2020. "A Class Rebellion: Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor on How Racism & Racial Terrorism Fueled Nationwide Anger." *Democracy Now*. June 1. https://www.democracynow.org/2020/6/1/keeanga_yamahtta_taylor_protests_class_rebellion