

## **Who Reads This Stuff?: A Review of Four Community Studies**

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### **Books Reviewed:**

**Todd DeStigter.** *Reflections of a Citizen Teacher: Literacy, Democracy and the Forgotten Students of Addison High.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2001.

**Mark Lyons and August Tarrier, eds.** *Espejos Y Ventanas/Mirrors and Windows.* Philadelphia: New City Community Press, 2004.

**Lena Sze, ed.** *Chinatown Lives: Oral Histories from Philadelphia's Chinatown.* Philadelphia: New City Community Press, 2004.

**Mark Salzman.** *True Notebooks: A Writer's Year at Juvenile Hall.* New York: Vintage Books, 2003.

**J**ust like the preacher's daughter who gets herself into trouble, my own well educated daughters eschew the stacks of academic books that line my study and dining room table. "Who reads this stuff?" they ask as they hide behind their 'zines or CD liner notes. Defensively I reply, "Different people," while wondering about the truth of my answer. In what ways do the books reviewed here—oral histories, both written and photographed, ethnographic studies and journalistic accounts—get read? What is the value of these wide ranging accounts of marginalized subcultures as varied as ESL students in rural Michigan, Mexican mushroom workers in Pennsylvania, residents in Philadelphia's Chinatown, and juvenile offenders in Los Angeles? Indeed, why should anyone read this "stuff" when there is so much "stuff" to read?

Two of these books are concerned with Latinos, a minority group that will soon make up one fifth of the U.S. population. *Reflections of a Citizen Teacher: Literacy, Democracy* and the *Forgotten Students of Addison High* by Todd DeStigter conducts

research within a language minority (LM) group of Spanish speaking students in a rural school. DeStigter is an educational ethnographer concerned with the lack of adequately prepared ESL teachers. As a former high school teacher, now a teacher-researcher, he steps into the Latino subculture by volunteering to tutor and attend classes with students who are doing poorly in their predominantly White high school. Working out of Dewey's theories of citizenship, DeStigter suggests that democracy is a responsibility but also "a gift to be managed wisely" (23). He advises what he calls "teacher citizens" to think like ethnographers by understanding how students define themselves, their contexts, and their goals. Thick with recorded conversations and classroom fieldnotes, this study helps the reader feel what it is like to be an unseen, unheard student, misunderstood by teachers and possessing goals and definitions of success different from those of the high school culture at large. *Reflections of a Citizen Teacher* offers no easy answers. Instead, the book is concerned with the ethics of conducting research based on rigorous self examination and grounded in such literacy theories such as "critical empathy" (Robinson) and "prophetic criticism" (West). But isn't this "stuff" meant only for educators or theory heads?

*Espejos Y Ventanas/Mirrors and Windows* is written in Spanish and English and also offers insights into the social inequities experienced by a community of Latinos. These oral histories, edited by Mark Lyons and August Tarrier, also enact Dewey's concerns with democracy and citizenship. Lyons and Tarrier document the stories of Mexican farmworkers and their families who reside mainly around Kennett Square, Pennsylvania and work in Pennsylvania's 365 million dollar a year mushroom industry. The mushroom farmers tell stories about leaving their small Mexican hometowns to work 60-80 hour weeks so that they eventually can bring their whole families to live in America and become documented citizens. The book places individual experiences in context, explaining that "in 46 minutes at minimum wage in the US, a Mexican can make as much as in an entire day back home" (17). Although *Mirrors and Windows* recounts the narratives of a particular group of families who now reside in the United States, the book illuminates elements of the experiences of all poor peoples migrating from their homelands to richer countries, fueled by the dream of having better lives.

The book is enhanced by photographs of the workers and their celebrations, lyrics to the ballads they sing, recipes for tamales, and pictures of the dances they re-enact through their dance company, Danza Tenochtli. Through the narratives of both men and women, we learn of the fear of crossing the border, leaving parents and family behind, not knowing English, and working under unrelenting and unhealthy condi-

tions. If everyone were required to read this book, more people might demand that immigrant men women and children be given decent treatment. But who really cares about who makes our food?

*Chinatown Lives: Oral Histories from Philadelphia's Chinatown* features oral and pictorial snapshots of twenty-two residents of this small (5,000) Asian-American community, reflecting on both the past and their current work and everyday lives. Volunteer interviewers were trained in oral history methodology and ethics, producing transcripts, digital videos and black and white photographs of their subjects that were then edited by Lena Sze as part of an Asian Arts Initiative. In the process of really listening to the stories presented in this book, says Sze, "I've swallowed these oral histories" (10). Her phrase describes the overall effect of this book—a dim sum table of narratives that defy stereotypes of both Asians and of Chinatowns, often viewed only fleetingly through Western eyes. A beautiful paperback with silky pages, this text has often been picked up and paged through by visitors to my house because it can be read one story at a time. Each portrait of a store owner, restaurant manager, hair stylist, pharmacist, educator or activist from Chinatown is accompanied by full page artistic photographs taken by photojournalist Rodney Atienza.

What do you learn from encountering these lives through the lenses of the interviewer and photographer? You learn about the Chinese immigrants in the 1860s who built the railway lines across America; the 110,000 Japanese Americans who were sent to internment camps during World War II; Chinatown's successful campaign in 2000 to prevent a baseball stadium from being built in the neighborhood; the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that restricted the number of Asians allowed to immigrate to the United States; the central roles that the Chinese Christian Church and the Holy Redeemer Chinese Catholic Church play in Chinatown. You learn that ABC means American Born Chinese. Mainly you learn how these Asian immigrants, like the Mexican immigrants described in *Mirrors and Windows*, embody the ideology of the American dream: Work hard and succeed. But who needs to know all this stuff?

The final book to be considered here is the one most likely to be read by the nonacademic reader, *True Notebooks: A Writer's Year at Juvenile Hall*, by best selling novelist Mark Salzman. Following the familiar template of teacher/writer as savior popularized most recently by *Freedom Writers*, Salzman does his redemptive work in an unfamiliar place, a lockup facility for violent teenage offenders in Los Angeles. Salzman was prompted to visit the facility by the trouble he was having drawing the character of

a jailed teenager in a novel he was writing. Narrated in clear moving prose, Salzman interweaves dialogue and commentary with the juvenile offenders' writing in order to demonstrate what these boys' lives were like before prison and what they believe lies ahead for them. His students write about families torn apart by poverty, dearth, gang violence, incurable diseases, and sad divorces. Salzman uses his novelistic skills to probe the anger and despair of these young men's lives as well as his own struggle to understand and uplift them. In one poignant scene, he dares to play the cello before a full audience of offenders. Choosing "The Swan" by Camille Saint Saëns, a piece that he says makes him think about his mother, he looks up to find young men weeping, who applaud and demand he repeat the piece three more times. Rather than a study or an oral history, this book is memoir about unrealized lives constrained by unjust socio-economic contexts. But why care about criminals who eat up our tax dollars and will never become contributing citizens?

In different ways with different audiences, from academics and social justice workers to average citizens in a free society where privilege is taken for granted, we all need to read this stuff. For those of us who teach service learning courses, these books model both the processes of observation, interviewing, and reflection we encourage our students to develop as well as the types of projects we hope our students will produce. *Chinatown Lives* serves as exemplar for courses that use text and image to produce oral history. And *Especjos Y Ventanas/Mirrors and Windows* provides a blueprint for faculty and students who wish to work with a community of undocumented or migrant Hispanic workers to record the community's experiences and perspectives. Since many service learning projects center on tutoring, the Salzman book shows what dedicated teaching can accomplish while openly addressing the obstacles and complexities of literacy initiatives and even grappling with the question of whether work in a juvenile detention facility with violent offenders is "futile." And especially for English teachers-in-training, a book like *Reflections of a Citizen Teacher* highlights the inequities of our schools and the lack of access to literacy afforded to marginalized students.

These books do not just provide us with an understanding of unfamiliar groups of citizens. They also show us how to position ourselves as researchers, volunteers, and tutors in order to compose and document narratives that respect and illuminate the lives we collaboratively study. When we as social justice and literacy workers conduct such studies, the unstated mandate is to learn more about ourselves as we study others. Each of these books offers such possibilities.