

Johns Hopkins University Press Podcast

Jeraldine Kraver, *The CEA Critic*

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Mary Alice Yeskey

Welcome to the Johns Hopkins University Press Podcast. I'm Mary Alice Yeskey with the JHU Press Journals Division. The latest issue of the journal *The CEA Critic* is a special issue titled "Living the Teaching Life in a time of COVID-19". With us today to talk about this timely and important issue is the journal's general editor, Dr. Jeri Kraver.

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today.

Jeraldine Kraver

Well thank you Mary Alice, I am really happy to talk about this issue.

Mary Alice Yeskey

It's a good one and I'm really excited to get into it because it's obviously very relevant (laughs). So, I just wanted to ask since a lot of our listeners might not be familiar with CEA or its journal, if you could just give us a little basic information first: What the CEA is and what the mission of the organization is?

Jeraldine Kraver

Sure. The CEA is the College English Association, and it was established around 1938, 39 by what I like to describe as a bunch of young Turks who felt that MLA wasn't necessarily meeting the needs of teacher scholars. MLA was dedicated to scholar teachers, and we really wanted to put the emphasis, or they back then, wanted to put the emphasis on the teaching part of that designation and that continues today. So, we still emphasize the relationship between teaching and scholarship and focus a lot on how we teach the materials that are also the source of our scholarship and the diversity of that material. So, that's the mission of the organization and the focus of the journal for the past eighty years--I don't do math very well--and I've been a member of CEA for thirty years, I started as a graduate student, so I've watched it evolve.

It is, it's really exciting to be able to go and see annually at our annual meeting all of the same familiar faces, many of whom I went to graduate school with. So, we're still members. That's what I love about it. It's very collegial and it emphasizes that at our annual conference, which is why not having the conference last year was so horrible to use, because wait, that's where we reconnect. But anyway, the conference aligns with the mission of the journal which aligns with the mission of the organization which is a broad look at what we do as college English professors, and that's evolved to include more composition and rhetoric, more in multi-

modality, LGBTQ issues, more in film, so the journal and the organization have evolved as the profession has.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Well, you brought up my next question which was regarding your annual meeting. So, as you noted in the introduction for this issue, typically the third issue every volume year of *CEA Critic* is proceedings from your annual meeting, and I dare say like pretty much all academic conferences this year yours was cancelled due to the pandemic. So, my question to you is what was the sort of timeline on that and how did you pivot so quickly from, you know, a meeting being cancelled to turning this into the issue becoming focused on the very reason why the meeting was cancelled?

Jeraldine Kraver

Well, the first response was panic, and then hysteria, and then figuring out what I was going to do and how I was going to contact Chris, my JHUP contact and say, "Oh my God, we have no issue," and then I just thought to myself, this is such a horrible time that we're living through, and it was fairly recent. It was March and we were all losing our conferences. We were all sad about it and I just said, I wonder if I'm the only one whose world has been rocked, and I said, okay, let's see about everybody else, but I didn't want it to be an academic exercise. I didn't want it to be these analytical research papers. I wanted it to be people's gut responses to being in the middle of this moment. And so, I realized I could send out a call for papers, short little papers, the way proceedings usually is. They're not full-length papers cause they were conference presentations and in the way that the proceedings tries to capture a picture of the conference for the audience of readers, I wanted this issue to capture the experience of COVID for not necessarily members of our organization cause all the people who contributed weren't, but to people in our profession. These small moments that they sort of have to address in this immediate pandemic.

Once it happened I was like, great this is a brilliant idea and hopefully I'll get a couple of articles and I truly was emailing everybody I know, "Hey, you want to write an article? Do you want to write a reflection? Do you want to write a piece for this?" One of the poems in it is from Kelly Norman Ellis who was a colleague of mine, she was actually the maid of honor at my wedding, and she's the chair of the English department at Chicago State and on Facebook she published, she didn't publish, she wrote a poem, and she put it on Facebook, and I wrote her. I said, "Kel, can I have this please for my issue?" And the photo essay by Ken Prince in the issue, Ken Prince was my husband's best man at the same wedding, there were only four of us at the wedding, we took off and did it, you know, on a Saturday. But anyway, Ken was his best man and he's also a registrar and a photographer and I'm like, "Ken, you got any pictures?" So, I was tapping people I know and then all of a sudden all of these other people started submitting stuff too, so, you know, it was a wealth. I was overwhelmed.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That is charming and delightful (laughs). It's such a family affair for you. I guess, well my question is so you kind of started asking people but then there was like a relatively formal call for papers, and so once that came out what was the response that you were kind of surprised by the response?

Jeraldine Kraver

I was stunned by it. I get emails, we have a Gmail account, and all of a sudden, I go on and there'd be ten emails from people either asking if their ideas were good or just submitting things and then I realized they were coming from everywhere. They were coming from around the world, and everybody wanted to tell the story of their experience and what they were going through, and I think because it was so new then, writing about it didn't feel like an ordeal. It felt almost exciting in these early days. I think now I might get a more miserable, they're tired of it kind of response, but I posted it in all of the regular call for papers sites and just started getting people submitting their stories of all kinds. I got creative works. I got analytical essays, people who were talking about an Ian Forester story and how it fits in with this. People talking about a play that they saw but others talking about how they had to shift their teaching or what it revealed to them about the lives of their students, and so it was so hard to choose because I wanted to hit all of these sort of sub-topics but I felt like I could have done three issues and just interestingly we're at the proof stage and when I realized how big the manuscript was I wrote to Chris and I said, "I think it's too long, I think it might be longer than usual." They're usually 100 pages and this one's 144 and he said, "All of the upper people were fine with it," and allowed us to have this really exceptionally large. So, I was really even happier then, you guys have always been great to me, so.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Oh, well I won't take credit but thank you (laughs). I mean it's true though, it's just another example of everybody making quick and important changes to how you do your job, you know. We suddenly have a journal that's twice as big, we gotta make a journal that's twice as big.

Jeraldine Kraver

Yeah, exactly.

Mary Alice Yeskey

And you touched on sort of the fact that there were so many responses from so many different countries. Is that normal for *CEA Critic*? Are you mostly educators in the states that are submitting, this is sort of an abnormality in terms of the global reach?

Jeraldine Kraver

Well, we often get global submissions. Something that we like, we like to cultivate. One of our long-term members is actually from Belarus, she comes to all of our conferences, and she's published in the journal, and we try to cultivate. We try to be a place for international scholars

to feel like they have a home here, and an interesting story is, I was thinking about this when you were asking me some questions about language, about things that were challenging and working with second language learners, or second language speakers, I'm sorry, English is not their first language and we made this conscious decision not to over-edit because we wanted the natural voice of people who were not native speakers to come through. But one of them wrote to us and said, "Given your willingness to help me with my language, I now feel empowered to submit my work to other English language journals." And that's a place we want to be for scholars because so many of the international scholars who submit to us are writing about American literature, or British literature, or often they're writing about literature of their own countries that we don't know. So, we've always been a welcoming place for international scholars. But in this one we've got India, Hong Kong, France, Switzerland, China, and across the United States from Texas to Georgia to Pennsylvania. So, we've got this real diversity and I tried to touch on that, so I had to reject some essays because it's like, I already have one from China and I don't want to do too many. So, the short answer is yes, we've always been open to writers internationally but never the amount that we got.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Wow. The first thing that I read from this issue which just struck me, which was one of those moments of well, obviously, but it really resonated was in your introduction you said something to the effect of for generations this is the first global event that we will globally have a memory of and globally have stories for, and as much as you know, you get sort of depressed thinking about that it's everywhere and we're all dealing with it, but then it's, there's a strange sort of hopefulness to that, like, we're all going to be telling these stories for generations. I told my son just, like, a couple days ago your grandchildren are going to be like, "Grandpa, what was COVID like?"

Jeraldine Kraver

This is so true and in one of your questions you were talking about now, how it's been months after, months after this all started.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That's my next question actually (laughs).

Jeraldine Kraver

Good, this is perfect because I see it in my students are feeling the effects. I teach English courses and I do pre-service teachers. So, I've got two different types of students and they write to me and they say, you know, "Jer, I'm beside myself. I'm in a panic. I don't know what to do. I can't read. I can't sit still." There's a sadness that's coming over them and not because they can't be with their friends, just overall sadness and I said in class just yesterday, hand to God, I teach Tuesday Thursday, I said to them yesterday, "Guys, wherever you go in the world, people will be talking, you could be in Antarctica because they can't come back, all the

scientists are trapped down there because of COVID, you could go to Africa, wherever you go in your life people will say, yeah 2020, where were you?" Tell me one other event? Right, World War II didn't touch the world the way this was.

My husband was saying Y2K, I'm like, I don't think places that didn't have internet were really worried about the crash, so it really is this wonderful moment of unity that will hopefully give them some solace, but I do see this sadness. And a lot of the people who wrote articles were seeing that even early on, that their students were just at sixes and sevens and didn't know how to make sense of what was going on and fumbling through, and so to me I really think finding something positive in this and for me it was that point that I'm making with students about it being everywhere is exactly what this issue is trying to illustrate, that wherever you are in the four corners of the world the faculty at the university is dealing with the same things you are regardless of whether it's a two-year college or a four-year college or a university in China or some fancy university in Switzerland, we're all just wrestling with the same things.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, and beyond academia too, you know, and I think it also helps everybody realize how, you know, and this isn't one of my pre-written questions, the sort of disparate parts of your life, everybody realizes that we've got nine different bubbles, you know. You're a parent, you're an educator, you're teaching kids, you've got your own kids, or I'm caring for my mother, everyone suddenly, the rest of their life has sort of become a little more apparent and I think it's hopefully, at least for me I feel like it's giving everyone a little bit of empathy for what everyone deals with.

Jeraldine Kraver

Right, and as I said I work with preservice teachers and they're, like, celebrating cause, you know, my argument to them was that when schools open up full-time you should all go on strike because nobody's going to want their kids back again. So, you want more money, you want smaller classes, you want more support staff, go on strike because no one, the parents are going to be like, "No, don't send them back to me," and also beginning to understand what the job entails, and I think even for those of us who are in a bubble of a university where everything is sort of hunky dory. My university is dealing with real financial issues but even at every university the financial issues are one thing the how do I educate and care for my students is another, and I think what this issue reveals is what the mission is of the CEA as an organization and that is to think about what we do as teachers and think about how we care for our students. That we are the caretakers of their social and emotional well-being, and that all of these articles, or at least many of them, are really about, how do we care for our students? And I loved that feeling of commitment to their well-being and their frustration. So, one article was about setting up a center to help students during this time. Like, on the fly, all of a sudden, they create this. Another one of the writer's talks about how it's revealing the economic disparities and cultural disparities among his students in India who don't have access to technology, so

that we become, our role as the caretakers of these humans in our classrooms I think becomes something that is more central, and we all are back burnering our academic lives, and our oh we've got to publish these articles and stuff. When we begin to think, well, what we really do is work with human beings that we have to help support in these really challenging times while we do those nine, ten things that you were talking about.

Mary Alice Yeskey

You just reminded me, one of my favorite quotes, and I don't know who said it so I'm going to mangle it, but something to the effect of that the word crisis, like the Latin root of that or whatever Greek, is to sift, to sift out all the bad stuff and then you're left with just what's the important stuff. So, that's another one I've been saying to myself, like, it's a crisis but we're getting all the nonsense out of the way to get to the root and the core of your mission which is exactly what you just said which is great.

Jeraldine Kraver

It's what I say to my students all the time which is, you know, we're opening up Pandora's box and I'm like, yeah, no one really reads the rest of that, right. They don't pay attention to what was at the bottom, at the little bottom a tiny little bit of hope that was still at the bottom of Pandora's box. So, in the Pandora's box of all this horrible stuff that's happening to us, let's try and focus on those little hopeful moments.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Exactly, and that's a great segue because my next question was about one of my favorite pieces in the issue which was the comic that your student Dani Butcher put together. So, my first question is has there ever been a comic in *The Cea Critic*? This is a new medium for you guys?

Jeraldine Kraver

It is. It's brand spanking new, and it's funny I teach, she was in my class on global graphic novels, and I am not like a graphic novel person, but I started paying attention to graphic novels because I do prepare teachers and *Persepolis* and *Maus* and all these graphic novels were making their way into the classroom and then somebody said, well why don't you teach a class on it so that's what I do. I teach a class on graphic novels from the Ivory Coast and from Mexico and blah blah blah, and so I'm not really an expert in comics theory. We read Scott McCloud who does comics theory, and usually they are far more adept at this than I am, and she just wrote to me. She's going to be a future English teacher so she's in our program, and she wrote to me and said I made this comic, and it was about something not having to do with COVID and I thought it was great and I said, "Oh my God, this is, like, raw." It's a very raw kind of comic but I said I thought it was amazing. So, when this issue came about, I said would you want; their final project could be making a comic and I said would you want to, and we'd gone online, this was the class that I was teaching and then we'd shifted online, and so she sent it to me and said look at this what do you think about it, and I that's when I said yes, I want you to make one for

my issue. And so she came up with the comic that's in there that really gives you a sense of the student's eye-view, both the newness of it, when she's got the screen with all the faces, the sort of synchronous class going on and now when I see her, you know, she's feeling the effects of it too. She's beginning to feel a little stressed and a little anxious about, you know, what it's going to be like being an observer in the classroom when it's online as a pre-service teacher, but I really felt it was important to have a student voice in there, to see what it was like from the other side.

We often publish the work of graduate students because we like to be congenial. I was, as I said, I've been a member for 30 years, I started as a graduate student. I was brought there by John Shawcross who was one of the former presidents of the organization, and so he brought his graduate students there. My husband, who is the managing editor of *The Critic*, I think, and teaches at CU Boulder, he was Dr. Shawcross' student as well, so there's a connection with bringing new young blood to it. I bring my graduate students there, and so I really thought that having a student's voice in this and a new mode, speaking in the mode that is comfortable to this generation, the comic, it was a natural to me, I was so excited that she wanted to do it.

Mary Alice Yeskey

It's great, and it really, that and the photo essay, visually it's such an interesting issue also. Yeah, it's not just this tome of essays, you know, even if it was there's something very organic feeling about it, you know, it really feels real and genuine and not just like academic work, we're gonna discuss this analytically kind of tone. There's a very human feel to the whole issue.

Jeraldine Kraver

That's what the organization is. If someone wants to know what the organization is in a nutshell, this issue does it, because there are a couple of, like, more intellectual. Actually, one of my colleagues is in it, Kenneth Chan, and he is a film professor, and he writes about being Asian in a time when we have the China virus, what is it like, you know, this idea of disconnection. So, there are some that are a little bit, it's the conference in a nutshell, cause it's some serious and some analytical, and then some very personal, and then some creative, and then some multi-modal, and in fact one or two of the essays that I got were on the occasion of COVID I thought this and I said, eh eh, you thought this let's turn that into an article for the next issue that I'm gonna need because it was just on the occasion of COVID whereas I wanted this to be about the COVID experience. Not, oh I was behind on this play, COVID gave me the time. Uh uh, that's not a COVID issue, that's not a COVID essay.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That's not a response, yeah.

Jeraldine Kraver

Exactly, and I wanted it to be. They were great essays, so I'm going to use them elsewhere, but I really wanted this to be, this is what COVID did to my world.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, and I think it's so important, I mean despite the fact that we're living in the age that we're living in, and everyone can post on social media, and blog, and all that to have a real tangible record is so important, you know what I mean? Because despite the fact that we are content dizzy, scholarly journals really are a much more permanent record than just, you know, a year's worth of Facebook posts. So, I think there's an importance to that which journals does more so than any other medium and it's so much faster than books. So, you able to respond to this so quickly is a special thing, I think.

Jeraldine Kraver

Yeah, it's funny, you know, the last big issue we did was the anniversary issue, our 80th anniversary issue, and I did that, that was a double issue and I thought at that point that this was something that captured the story of the organization and it did. But it was a lot of interesting things and little small pieces and it was the trajectory of the organization as it evolved or the journal is it evolved over 80 years, but this one really captures the spirit of the, it's replacing the conference and it captures the spirit of the conference in a way I really wanted to, and I don't know if they've made it public yet, but we are also not going to meet next year, they've just canceled the 2021 conference. I know, don't tell me I've got to figure out something fast. I'm heartbroken by it. In fact, I've got to go in and change my, edit out my introduction because the last line is "I can't wait to see everybody," and so I think the organization knows now but yeah, that one damn broke my heart. It's like wait a minute, as I said, that conference is so essential to the character of who we are and so at least maybe in 2022 we'll be mask-less and can see some smiling faces. Now I'm trying to figure out, great, at least I have a year to come up with the next proceedings.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Not quite the emergency situation.

Jeraldine Kraver

COVID two maybe, you know, COVID two.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Bite your tongue (laughs). The last thing I wanted to ask you were a couple of questions, I'm going to bounce your own questions back on yourself, because I was also quite taken with the questions that you asked in your call for papers which were really just open-ended almost personal questions, like tell me about your experience, so I wanted to find out your answers to those, the first of which was, and this is a big one so you can answer this as big or small as you

want, which is how has everything that's going on affected you scholarly endeavors as a teacher, as a professor, for better and/or for worse?

Jeraldine Kraver

Well, in terms of scholarship I'm really lucky. I'm on the back-end of my career, I'm just trying to figure out, I'm ready to retire, I just have to figure out what I'm going to do until I find something to do in retirement. I'm not retiring cause I'll just sit around in the house and watch hours of Dr. Pimple Popper and eat. So, I've decided that, and feel free to leave that in, I own my watching Dr. Pimple Popper. Anyway, so, I'm like, okay, what am I going to do with the rest of my life? So, I have four articles that I've just simply backburnered although one is a project that I'm really excited about, but I just said, I don't need them. But I do feel for my junior colleagues who still feel the pressure of being an academic and having to perform. Our university has paused the tenure clock which I think is helpful and I think a lot of universities have, but even when you pause it, all you're thinking about is oh my God, I'm going to have even double to do next time. So, in that sense, it doesn't affect me.

I'm teaching face-to-face as I said because I can't imagine doing synchronous teaching. It's funny, my husband and I are both at retirement age and we've both said, we can't let this be the year we retire. We can't end in masks, not being able to deal with our students, and next semester I'm still teaching face-to-face, and in fact I'm going to teach a class of 35 in a room that holds 200 because I need it for the spacing and it's a class that I love, it's a class that I look forward to teaching every year and I'm really anxious about it and I'm filling it with all my own students so I can hope that they'll talk more. But as a teacher it's just not what I want, and you know, it's something that I thought about. My administrators keep saying, "Oh, I keep hearing from the students that they like this hybrid model," or "They're really doing well in the synchronous," and I said to my class yesterday, again cause I taught yesterday, and you can excuse my language, every single one of them said that's bullshit. I call bullshit on that. They don't know anybody who's loving this, but administrators are trying to put on a happy face, and I said to my students, "You don't have to put on a happy face. No one's happy. Let's just understand, none of us are happy. That doesn't mean we curl up into a corner and die." It just means that we acknowledge that being unhappy with how things are going, is a-okay, that's a normal state to be unhappy with this. But don't pretend, don't make anybody force you to put on this happy face, and I see that a lot in the profession that people are: put on your happy face, don't look sad. So, I'm frustrated with the profession for forcing that on some faculty and forcing it on students, but for me that's the thing that bothers me most because at this stage in my career I'm so centered on their lives and their world and making it easy for them that my stuff. I'm 62 years old. I can deal with it. I'm not 19 where this is the biggest trauma in my life, and I can say to them, trust me, if this is the biggest trauma you're gonna have a very happy life because this is not that traumatic, but you can't tell that to a 19-year-old. They okay boomer me then, they go okay boomer so I'm like eh. So yeah, so I feel the pain of a lot of the essays. In fact, I might have chosen them because I had an empathetic response to the people writing it.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, I think that's true and again another reason why it's so important. I think, you know, just hearing everybody else is going through the same thing is so great, and like I said before we started recording I love hearing goof ups on the radio when the reporter's kid is screaming in the background I'm just like, thank you, I'm not the only one with a screaming child in the background. It just makes you feel, like, just a little bit more connected (laughs).

Jeraldine Kraver

Yep, when my colleagues and I sit down for a socially distanced cocktail, that's what we talk about. We talk about, oh my God, did you see this. Oh my God, this student was brushing his teeth during my Zoom class. You know, it's just, my husband teaches a course on skiing and snowboarding and some kid was on a ski lift. He had a snow mask Zooming into class.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Okay, that's impressive. That's impressive. Right, I had a meeting where somebody was at the barber shop in on the meeting once. Which I thought was a good, like, you know, just using your time smartly.

Jeraldine Kraver

Multitasking?

Mary Alice Yeskey

Multitasking, that was the word I was looking for. Thank you (laughs). I guess my last question, which is again one of the ones you asked in your call for papers, which is kind of on a positive note, what are you doing to stay sane? What keeps you, you know, we're not lying and saying that we're happy, but what's one thing that's keeping you afloat these days?

Jeraldine Kraver

I'm in a bunch of organizations that meet, and we have these Zoom meetings, and the first one they do is they go around, they say, "So tell us what you're doing?" And my standard line is "I haven't killed my husband or eaten my dog, and that's how I know I'm surviving." You know, Colorado up until now with the fires which we've been dealing with now and there, they're actually in the area where I live, we've had beautiful weather and we can be outside, and so, I just spend a lot of time outside hiking and running and being outdoors, walking with my dog. I have to turn in my ballot today because I want my little sticker. So, I'm on my way to turn in my ballot and walk to the ballot box, stuff like that, just to be there. I don't have kids, so I don't deal with that. I'm in school two days a week, but like everybody else I was going to bake bread, I was gonna do yoga every day, I was gonna play the piano. I had all these plans; I did none of them. I did none of them. I watch TV, I eat. My life is exactly the same except I don't get to go

out as much as I would like. I think trying to be as ordinary as possible in extraordinary times is a way of my keeping sane.

Like the articles, these are all teachers who are trying to do what they do as teachers. They're trying to keep being teachers in the face of an enormous challenge of the pandemic. But they're trying to keep things as ordinary as possible for their students, and I think that's what we do. Be ordinary in extraordinary times.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That was an excellent note to end on. Thank you so much Jeri, I appreciate your time.

Jeraldine Kraver

Oh, Mary Alice, it was wonderful. I love talking about my *CEA Critic*, it's my baby. I love it and I welcome people out there to send submissions.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Excellent, I will include all of that linkage when we post this.