“Visibility,” Michel Foucault famously argued, “is a trap” (200). Foucault reached this understanding as a result of his efforts to theorize the panopticon, an 18th-century prison that was designed to control the behavior of inmates by ensuring that they were continuously subject to the gaze of those entrusted with supervising them. For Foucault, the panopticon offers a metaphor for understanding how power functions in modern society. “It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen,” he wrote, “that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection” (187). Significantly, Foucault recognized the panoptic principle—that is, the shaping power of the gaze—at work in other institutions, including school.

Given the surprisingly large number of submissions that the call for this issue of English Journal elicited, we suspect that Foucault’s observations are likely to resonate with English teachers working in the current education reform era, a time when local media publish standardized test scores as a way to hold teachers accountable for their students’ performance, when teachers are subject to unannounced walk-through observations, and when they are required to submit written lesson plans as evidence of their having complied with prescriptive standards. As the articles in this issue demonstrate, however, the gaze is not unidirectional. Rather, there are times when people make themselves visible to others for the express purpose of capturing their attention and resisting what they recognize as unfair or unproductive practices and mandates. To this end, Steve Mann, Jason Nolan, and Barry Wellman use the term sousveillance to refer to a practice wherein people “resist surveillance through non-compliance and interference ‘moves’ that block, distort, mask, refuse, and counter-surveil the collection of information” (333). Visibility, in other words, is not always a trap. It can also constitute a form of resistance, and that is the source of this issue’s call for teaching with our doors open.

While the authors whose work appears in this issue of English Journal approach the subject of visible teaching in different ways, they each take visibility as a starting point for considering how teachers can resist education reform mandates that promote, intentionally or otherwise, instructional practices that research suggests are not in the best interest of students. By reflecting on the many benefits that accompany a decision to open one’s classroom door to colleagues, administrators, and parents, these authors celebrate the liberatory potential of visible teaching.

In closing, we return to Foucault’s work, specifically, his admonition against conceptualizing power objectively—that is, as something that some people “hold” and “exercise,” and which others aspire to “seize” and “wield.” Instead, Foucault
argued that power is everywhere, with the result that people are continuously able to shape (and reshape) their relationships with others. Rather than understand ourselves as limited in what we are able to accomplish with students in our respective contexts, the authors whose work appears in the pages to follow challenge us to consider how teaching with our classroom doors open constitutes a form of resistance. In doing so, they, like Foucault, invite us to remember that we are always “freer than we think we are” (Bell 83).

Sean P. Connors (sconnors@uark.edu) is an associate professor of English education at the University of Arkansas. He has been an NCTE member since 2010. P. L. Thomas, professor of education (Furman University) and former NCTE Historian, taught high school English for 18 years in South Carolina before moving to teacher education. He is currently a column editor for English Journal and author of Beware the Roadbuilders (Garn Press). Contact him at paul.thomas@furman.edu and follow his work at http://radicalscholarship.wordpress.com/ and @plthomasEdD.

Scott W. Earl currently teaches AP English Literature and Creative Writing at Bedford Senior High School in Temperance, Michigan, and he has been an adjunct professor at Monroe County Community College. Heretofore a prolifically unpublished poet, his poetry has been shared primarily within his classroom and at local poetry readings. He has been a member of NCTE since 1997.

Training Day

So, you are the boxer, see?
I am the unwitting speed bag,
naively waiting for Fate.
You bring your work to me,
asking me to train you up,
be tough on you,
exhaust you.
Your written words are fists,
jabbing tentatively,
striking tenderly,
then building in intensity,
escalating quickly.
Soon I am fiercely ricocheting
off my wooden ceiling,
violently tossed by
brutal honesty,
raw anger,
animalistic rage.
My eyes beg for the beating to stop.
It continues.
Your images ravage my gut.

Rat-tat-tat-at, Rat-tat-tat-at.
Salted water wells in my swollen eyes.

Rattattatat, Rattattatat, Rattattatat, Rattattatat.
Your words are relentless,
gushing out of you, flooded with
Confusion and Anguish as you
seek answers that simply aren’t
yours for the knowing.
You finish, exhausted and spent,
lacking a victory, but
stronger for the work.

How do I edit your feelings?
How can I revise your pain?
I sway gradually to a stop,
dangling on my swivel,
still and quiet,
somewhat deflated,
gathering my faculties
to face tomorrow’s
flurry of words.

—Scott W. Earl
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Works Cited