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# Telling Stories to Anybody Who Will Listen: An Interview with Robert Colón

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Lida Colón is a PhD student in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric Program at Syracuse University. Her research interests include critical pedagogy, first year writing, critical race theory, and Black feminist thought. She currently serves as an Area Liaison for DBLAC (Digital Black Lit and Composition), a national support network of black graduate students in rhet/comp programs. When she isn't reading and writing, she's riding her bike or eating french fries.

## PREFACE

I started this project because my father is a writer. I am currently in the midst of rhetoric and composition doctoral coursework at Syracuse University, and a professor presented a timely opportunity to locate myself within the field by interviewing a compositionist. In speaking with my father, I situate myself both professionally and personally. First, the experiences of black students in first-year classrooms is the broad object of inquiry that finds me in a doctoral program. This interview presented an opportunity to listen to one Afro-Puerto Rican writer's experience of instruction as a New York City public school student and as a first-year writer at the City University of New York. He resolutely identifies as a writer, he practices in a wide range of genres, and he has consistent and thorough revising and editing practices—all things we aspire to teach in first-year writing classrooms; yet, Robert Colón developed these habits well after his formal education. This interview explores how writers outside of the academy can inform a pedagogy aimed at developing life-long writers rather than producing discrete material objects (like a final paper or portfolio) that are most often performative.

For the reasons I've named above and because he shares his writing in varied capacities, I consider my father a successful writer. Born to Puerto Rican parents in Manhattan in the mid-60s, he has spent his life across the bridge in predominantly black and Latinx neighborhoods in Brooklyn. Although he's shared with me that our lineage is peppered with writers and intellectuals, in this interview he reveals this didn't translate to having writers around him while he was growing up. The evidence of his writer identity, however, surrounded me throughout my own upbringing. He wrote countless songs and poems he would sing or recite at any time, in any place. He wrote short stories and novels, and most recently he has been working on both a documentary and a screenplay. My father's identity as a writer was a significant influence on my upbringing and is partly the reason I pursued the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program at Syracuse University in 2019. Thus, the personal impetus for this project: This interview helps me contextualize my own journey to and through my graduate education.



### Keywords

Interview, writer identity, embodiment, black writers, composition

The lineage of scholarship that centers the importance of black students—the importance of their writing, their experiences in the classroom, the environmental factors that either undermine or support their success—is extensive (Baker-Bell; Gilyard; Kynard; Smitherman; Young).<sup>1</sup> By thinking about my father’s writing practices, I aim to contribute to this lineage by identifying some of the characteristics of an environment my father built for himself—one that fosters the type of creative freedom that ushered a natural development of writer identity and practice that compelled him to write. I aspire to co-create such an environment with my students, so I consider whether any of those conditions can be fostered in first-year writing classrooms in productive ways. Thus, this interview also offers a site of comparative analysis. My father’s most memorable writing instruction took place in an environment where he was able to get away with inventing an entire section of his schoolwork with only one teacher ever even penalizing his grade; he didn’t start paying close attention to his writing until he was outside of the school setting. This paper urges composition scholars to consider writers outside of the academy in general in order to complicate our conceptions of their potential pedagogical contributions. Thus, this interview serves both personal and academic purposes. Personally, it not only situates me as a black academic in my doctoral program, but it also provides perspective on my relationship with my work and with the field in general within the lineage detailed by my father. As a piece of scholarship, this interview aims to contribute to an ongoing shift in focus from writers inside the academy to those outside the academy in pedagogical research.

#### INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT COLÓN ON SEPT. 28, 2019 IN HIS BACKYARD IN BROOKLYN, NY

Lida: Thank you for sitting for this interview with me. I want to investigate your writing practices and your experiences with writing over the span of your life up to this point.

Robert: Okay.

L: What is your writing history? Starting from the beginning. Does it extend further back than yourself?

R: I guess you’d have to start with my grandfather. My grandfather was a songwriter, and he performed songs in Puerto Rico, in the

town of Junco, in and around the town of Junco, in Puerto Rico. He was pretty popular actually. He got paid to go around, at different, you know, household events. Baptisms, birthday parties, such—he was a songwriter. And then—for me personally, I really didn’t consider being a “writer” until an incident in a remedial English class at York College, on my second trip to college. The adjunct/graduate student/professor gave us an assignment to write on a topic, just words that come out of your head, on this topic. Stream of consciousness exercise. She said, “Write three lines, not a sentence, just words.” I wrote down whatever came to my mind. I musta wrote 12, 15 words, adjectives. I finished pretty quickly. I looked around, people were still writing, and eventually I looked back at what I wrote. And when I read it, I was like, “Wow, this is interesting.” I was almost afraid to think it was poetic. But that’s what I thought. I didn’t know shit about poetry, I’d never read any poetry except what was assigned to me in school, and I barely did that. But it struck me that way and I was like, “Okay.” So everybody was finished and we all had to go around, round robin, reading what we had written. So people read, and then it came my turn. So, I read what I wrote, the way I heard it in my head, the way it sounded poetic to me. So I read it, and the class went “Oooo.” And it was shocking.

L: How old were you?

R: I musta been 26. I was a freshman in college. And a father. And a husband. And I had a job. I was a business owner, too. So, that reaction—I did not expect. I mean the whole class. And the professor caught herself reacting to it. That would be the first time I allowed myself to consider, that I could be a writer. Because it was an organic thing that happened, and I thought it was good, and other people thought it was good. You get that validation, from outside, because who knows? I think everything is good.

L: Did you write before that?

R: School assignments. I mean, the most creative writing I did was making up book reports for books I had never read. I would read the book title and just make up the entire story. I would not read the inside jacket or the back on purpose. I would look at the front cover and the title, and I would create a beginning, and a middle, and an end because that’s what they wanted from a book report—a summary.

<sup>1</sup> Geneva Smitherman, in addition to co-authoring the seminal resolution “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” (1974), which recognizes that language difference does not equate to inferior learning, wrote *Talkin and Testifyin* (1986) which traces Black English through black life in the United States and articulates its value in the composition classrooms, as well as the detriment of seeing it simply as a deviation from Standard American English. Keith Gilyard’s work, notably his 1991 *Voices of the Self*, explores relationships between black masculinity and writing instruction, as does Vershawn Ashanti Young in *Your Average Nigga* (2007). Both Gilyard and Young use reflections on their own experiences to illuminate these relationships. Carmen Kynard, a Black Feminist composition and rhetoric scholar, writes about the importance of black students to the development of the field and is a public scholar and educator. Her Black Feminist pedagogies are available on her website. April Baker-Bell’s 2020 release, *Linguistic Justice* articulates what she terms “Anti-Black Linguistic Racism” in composition classrooms and lays out a path forward through “Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy.” In short, black folks have been talking about black students in composition classrooms in academic spaces for at least the last 50 years.

L: What was writing in school like?

R: Except for that, writing sucked. It was a chore, it was a task, it was awful. It was not presented in a fun way. And I'm so angry at that.

L: What was making up those book reports like?

R: That was the fun part. It was scary too, 'cause I never knew what would come out, but I never got less than a B. Never got less than an 80, never. And I would do worse on the ones that I would read the inside jacket on than the ones I would make up totally.

L: I'm wondering right now where this imaginative impulse came from—why did that occur to you to just make up a story? Instead of just do what I imagine other students might've done, which is maybe not hand it in, or just struggle with it and try to write a few sentences. Did everyone not reading the book just make stuff up?

R: Not at all. Most of the students that didn't read the book did what you described. They failed. I couldn't fail. I couldn't not hand something in. That wasn't acceptable in my house. I had to pass everything. I had to do more than pass. I mean, I didn't do as well as I could've if I would've applied myself better, but I was a solid B student, without trying.

L: How did you come up with this plan?

R: Like I come up with most of my plans, in the 11th hour. I procrastinated. The first time I did it must've been like in the fourth grade. My first book report. I was given a book and told to read it, and I didn't. I was busy playin', busy watching television, busy doing everything, but I didn't wanna read that book. It was one of those library books you get from the school library with the plastic cover on it that smells like it's been there since the school opened. With yellow pages around the edges. A book I'd love to read right now, probably. I wasn't having any of it, so I just procrastinated procrastinated procrastinated. Two days before, the teacher probably said, "Don't forget your book report is due on Monday." And I was like oh, crap, now what? Uh, uh, uh, I know, I'll make it up! Your Uncle Kirk and I always had a crazy imagination. We had nothing else but our imaginations. Stories skated around my head all the time, it's just getting it down on paper. That discipline of writing it with a beginning, a middle, and an end, to make it palpable for her. That was my task. I didn't understand that at the time but that's what I was doing. I was saying to myself, "All right. What's she gonna like? She'd like a story with a dog or with a . . . and put this. And don't get too crazy." 'Cause I don't wanna lose myself either. I don't wanna make a whole story, I can't do that. That's what I would do out of desperation, that's usually how it comes about. And then—this was the worst thing that happened to me in terms of learning to love literature at an early age—I got

a 90. And she could not stop raving. She held it up to the class and was like, "This is how it's done." And I'm sitting there, not even feeling guilty. Feeling like, I got over, I'm makin' right now. Read a book? Why? I'm better than these shabby authors! I can make up a story better than any of them. I'm getting A's over here. So that was the problem. I get this 90, and I'm like, "I'm gonna keep doing this." I did it a couple more times, but in fifth grade I had Mr. Burns. By this time, I'm an expert at it, I think. I get a book report assignment like, "You suckas are gonna read the book? I got this." So it comes days before, and I'm like oh, okay, time to get to work. I look at the cover, I read the jacket. And I fashioned some story, and I give it to Mr. Burns, and it comes back with like a 70. I was mad. So I go to complain. I said, "Mr. Burns, why did I get a 70? This is better than—I mean come on." He said, "Robert, you deserve a 70." I said, "No I didn't. That's a good book report. There's hardly any marks on it. Right, my grammar was decent, why did I only get a 70?" He says, "You read that book?" I said, "Thank you Mr. Burns." End of discussion! I did not read a book in school until the 12th grade. Second semester. My last semester of high school.

L: Were you doing book reports all up to this point?

R: I did book reports every year. Mr. Burns was the only one who came close to catching me. Anybody who cared to look coulda known. Mr. Burns saw it, he was like, "This is bullshit."

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Working with Burgess and Ivanič's conception of writer identity as a combination of "what is socially available in academic contexts" and "writers' selection of particular discourse characteristics" (qtd. in Li and Deng 328), Ying Li and Liming Deng identify four aspects—stance, voice, self, and identity—which they consider essential to writer identity development. The authors articulate stance and voice as being concerned with the external. Where stance is established in the specific lexicon a writer uses, voice is an awareness of a broader discourse. Both stance and voice are heavily dependent upon "what is socially available in academic contexts." Self and identity, rather than being dictated by the external, are constructed in a dialectical relationship between societal expectations and individuals' internal reactions to those expectations. The relationship between self and identity parallels that between stance and voice. Where the self is co-constructed by projected societal hierarchies and a person's behavioral (or written) interactions with those hierarchies, identity reflects a dialectical relationship with "historical . . . institutional, ideological, social, and discursive practices" (336).

For my father, the "academic context" that determined what was "socially available" was the New York City public school system circa the 1970s and 80s. In Bushwick,<sup>2</sup> a neighborhood that at that time was populated mostly by black and brown people living in various levels of poverty, I cannot say for sure what teachers

<sup>2</sup> A neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. Now gentrified.

were or were not doing. We might infer from his grades that he was aware of socially appropriate textual choices and the larger discourse, evidenced by his self-censorship concerning inventing too much or too little. By consistently and successfully replacing authors' storytelling with his own for NYC public school assignments, my father not only practiced stance and voice but also interacted with institutional expectations in a way that fostered agency. Any perceived lack of investment on the part of his teachers allowed him long-term practice with stance and voice, along with building his writing confidence (particularly surrounding invention). In receiving good grades for his work, he decided he was "better than these shabby authors," and one could argue that the invention momentum that built through my father's primary and secondary education planted a seed for a writer identity he didn't begin to own until he started writing for himself in adulthood.

A few important questions emerge from this narrative. Generally, how did Robert's writer identity form outside of formal education? What are we doing inside the classroom that prohibits this development? Conversely, what can we learn about the development of writer identity from the space provided by teachers who weren't checking too closely that he'd done the assignment properly? This last question acknowledges that even though teachers may not be individually negligent, the neoliberal public school systems within which they operate ask (or require) them to neglect their students as people (otherwise, someone might have thought my father's fictitious book reports more problematic). I certainly am not suggesting academic neglect develops a strong writer identity, yet teachers who weren't paying close attention offered rare space to imagine and practice invention, sowing the seeds for Robert's writer identity; in the second question, I reflect on my own responsibility as a writing instructor operating within the neoliberal K–16 apparatus. How can I make space for students to engage deeply in their own imaginations and to challenge, from their own social locations, the societal hierarchies projected onto them that co-create their selves and articulate those challenges using stance and voice?

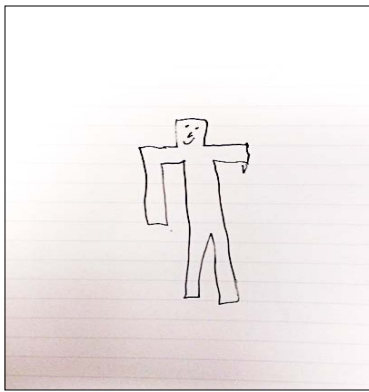


Figure 1. Paper doll outline.

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L: I'm interested in this story creation that you talked about with Tio Kirk, and how that allowed you to be successfully imagining for school. You talked about not having anything else. Can you elaborate on that?

R: We didn't have a lot of toys 'cause we couldn't afford 'em. We

literally would take loose-leaf paper and draw a man, lemme show you over here.

Now imagine the paper flopping, 'cause we're holding it, and it would be Batman and Robin, it would be Superman and somebody else, Green Hornet and his sidekick . . .

L: And were you watching that stuff on TV or you were reading it?

R: Yeah, this is all the stuff we were watching on the six channels we had. And comic books were the reading. That was a huge part of my literary upbringing. We would play in empty lots in the summer, with dirt and garbage. We did a lot of imagination games. We'd grab a stick and the stick became a gun. Or a spear. Or the cover of the garbage can became a shield. Anything that we found laying around became something else. And we became other people. And we would go on these adventures to try and save the damsel, the building, the whatever. But we were always on some kind of mission to save something, going somewhere. And we would be in cars, and we would be on rocket ships. Man, there was nothing we wouldn't be doing. The stairs would become part of these adventures. If we were sliding down the poles, it would become something. I mean, anything! If they brought some stuff and left it in the gate too long. If something was left in the hallway, anything! It was insane, it was awesome. 'Cause that's all we had to do. You had six channels, nothing but reruns, now what are you gonna do with the other 12 hours of the day? I mean, we did all kinds of crazy shit.

L: Could you give us a picture of how your writing has changed, or not changed from being 10 years old making up book reports to being 50+?

R: I've never thought about that until this very second, but I think I'm still telling stories to myself and to anybody who will listen. And I think that's the thread that has consistently run through my life. I'm a storyteller. I was telling stories then. I was pretty much the impetus for creating these imaginary worlds that me and Kirk would go into. Jumping from there to that moment in that remedial English class, where I let myself have that thought, to now, that thread is consistent. 'Cause I was telling a story about slavery in that class. I'm telling a story about myself in a lot of my poetry. And about my journey. I'm always telling a story about somebody or something that I'm experiencing or imagining. Sometimes I feel like it has to be told, the stories, and sometimes I feel like it's just for me. It's cathartic to get it out. It's changed along that thread. It's kinda hard for me to see how it's changed, I would have to look through it, 'cause I didn't really start writing for a few years after that moment in that English class. I have recently looked back at some of the old things that I've written, and I like it. I'm not sure I really see a change. It's hard because I dip into a lot of different genres when I write. I'll write prose, I'll write poetry, and I'll look for traditional poetic forms to adhere to, and I'll write what's freestyle now, poetry, I'll write a rap song, or a love song, with an

R&B rhythm in my head, or I'll write an essay on—something I'm working on right now called virtuality, and the impact of the internet and how that has changed our reality and what we deem as real, and juxtaposing that against all our time in virtuality. So it ranges, I think that's how it's changed. It's changed in that I'm not fearful of tackling any topic or any form. I really think I can write in any form if I apply myself to it.

L: Did you used to limit yourself before?

R: I was scared. I was really scared. And I think I've come upon the realization that I just wanna be a screenwriter. I've allowed myself that. I was just scared to say that. I'm like, "Oh wow, to actually do that? That would be crazy." But now it's not so crazy. And I think that's how it's changed. I've changed. And my writing has changed, it's become more bold, because I'm not afraid. That voice is good for me. And it's authentic.

L: You mention that you were writing essays, you've written poetry, you've written songs of all kinds. What function did writing serve for you?

R: It's something that I need to do. I have to. Things come to mind all the time. Ideas for songs, for poems, ideas about all kinds of things. It helps me to flush it out fully, in my own mind, to better understand the world. And my life is really about trying to understand the world, and my place in it. Writing helps me understand the world because when you start putting pen to paper and your thoughts come out, you see where you might be full of shit, and where you're strong, and that's what I want. I want to see that. Writing really exposes you. When you can be authentic and open yourself up, it is cathartic. It's vulnerable too. It's scary. But I'm a much better person when I write.

L: Do you remember learning how to write?

R: No. I still don't think I've learned how to write. I've not taken a writing course, except for those college courses, English 101 and remedial. Never took a creative writing course.

L: What was your awareness growing up of people writing around you, what was the writing happening around you? Did you have any awareness of writing in your environment?

R: No one that I knew in my circles or knew of was writing or considering writing as other than something that was mandated. Nobody was sitting down like hey, I just wanna write a poem, or hey I'm gonna write an essay, or hey, I'm gonna write about anything. No one did that around me.

L: What was that like to be writing in that nonwriting environment? Were you aware of that?

R: I didn't think about it and I wasn't sharing a lot with anybody,

so it didn't matter. People didn't know I was writing. Once they learned, I don't think it mattered 'cause of the way I am. They get the picture that I don't give a shit. So they don't say, "Oh you're writing poetry?" It wasn't like that. But no one else was really tryna write or express themselves in writing in my circles. It came about because I was hanging out with my friends, Cucho and Cuco, and I started talking about a story that I was thinking about, that had come to me about a time-travel story about a white supremacist who's raised from a baby to be a super person. He's trained to carry out this mission on his 23rd birthday, when he travels back in time assassinating key black people throughout the history of this country to keep the Civil Rights movement from happening. He's sent back and it works out. Now what happens is, as he's completing his mission, history's starting to change. So he gets to a point, the point of critical mass you could call it, because he's done such a good job, he's prevented the technology that allows him to travel back in time from being invented; he gets stuck. And he has to befriend a Black scientist to help him get out of his predicament. So, I tell 'em the story, and Cucho is like, "Dub, you should be a writer." And I was like, ". . . What?"

L: And this is in what relation to that remedial English class.

R: This is after that.

L: Year? Months?

R: Maybe months, maybe a year. Not too far after that. The seed was there, so that germinated the seed. When he said that, I was like, "What??" He says, "Yo you got a way with words man, you should really think about that you should be a writer, you should write." That whole night he didn't let it go. And I was like, "You know what, why not?" I mean, it doesn't cost me anything to get a piece of paper and a pen and write down what I'm thinking. And I do have a way with words, I've always had a way with words. I always was clever, I could always turn a phrase, I always thought about things differently than people around me, humorously, many times. And like that [snaps fingers]. It would occur to me in the moment. And I thought about that. Except that in school, the way it came out was in ranking contests. We would be baggin' on each other, and I had a great vocabulary all the time, I had a great facility, and I thought about all this so I says, "You know what, I think I might have the stuff. 'Cause I do have these things, I'ma give it a shot." That's what made me actually say, "I'm gonna have paper and pen with me all the time, and whenever the inspiration hits, I'm gonna put it down. I'm just gonna go, like I did in that class. I'm not gonna think. I'm gonna let that freedom ride." And the times that I do that are the best. When I get in my way is when I start thinking about it. When I start trying to create or fashion it into something that I want it to be instead of just letting it be what it's gonna be. Let it do what it do. That's the saying, it's true. Let it do what it do. It's gonna do it if you just get out your own way. It's us, getting in our way with all this bullshit. We all have that creative spirit—it's in us, it's just how it comes out. Some of us write, some of us take pictures, some of

us draw, whatever. But if we just get out our own way and let it be, its beautiful. That's the understanding that I came to. And that's pretty much what I do. I'll keep a pen and paper in the car. I keep a book with me and a pen in my bag.

L: Have you always done from that time?

R: From that time. It's rare that I don't have something handy to write with, unless I'm with people. If I'm with people I interact with people.

L: Some writing that you have not mentioned is the writing that you do that isn't creative. I'm talking about the writing that you do for work. I've heard you talk about being very intentional about the way you write emails, the way you talk to people in the office, and share ideas, and also I know that you did writing for Mami's judicial campaign, so what is this writing that would appear to be outside of that imaginative space? Can you talk about that?

R: Yeah, in the beginning that was very hard, very emotional for me because as a writer, I take everything that I write personally, whether it's for work or not. As a creative writer, it's personal. So when I first started writing investigative reports, I was pretty bad at it and I didn't get that you couldn't embellish language. That you had to strip it down to its bare essence. And that has actually helped me be a better writer, creatively. It has helped me be way more economic in my language, and I think good writers are economic in their language. The writers that I love the most are economic in their language. And that has taught me a lot. Because in an investigative report, it is the facts, and nothing but the facts. You really not getting into any kind of opinion, you're describing things specifically, clearly. There's nothing amorphous about it. There better not be. So I'd write a report and get it back from my supervisor all marked up with all these words crossed out that I didn't need. I'd sit there and seethe for 5, 10 minutes before I could do anything, and I didn't like it. But I got better at it, and I got good at it, and I got excellent at it, and I was helping correct reports, and helping people with their stuff, and I learned the use of the economy of language. And that has helped me write way better when I write a story. The story of the campaign that I'm writing for instance. You just wanna engage people—every word needs to have a purpose. That kind of professional writing helped me do that. That economy of language in an email. No one has time to go on. You need to say what you're saying, quickly and concisely, all the time. I was trained into that because I had to be. So I'm kinda glad. The campaign was different. The campaign was about giving—the writing really was about engaging the audience with the candidate in a way that makes her appealing, that introduces her, that reminds them, that excites them, it's advertising. I chose every post that went out on Facebook and it was well curated.

L: Did you do other material?

R: We did the advertising, I mean the flyers for the fundraisers

and the handout for the pamphlets, oh and also the bios. That we handed out, I wrote. That was just straight information. But the Facebook stuff was fun. 'Cause it would be a blurb, it wasn't a lotta work. I'd spend 15, 20 minutes on a sentence just to get it right. Thinking about it before I posted it. Do that two or three times a day. We had to do something every single day, obviously, so that was fun.

L: Did your experience and identification as a writer impact the writing you did for the campaign or that you do for your job?

R: Absolutely. All writing is creative in some sense. And I found ways to interject my humor into the writing for the campaign. If you look at the Facebook posts you'll see that.

L: You wrote a song for the campaign.

R: I wrote a song for the campaign, a rap song. I forgot about that. And the writing for my job, absolutely. I have something that I give to the members that I represent before an interview which is called "Interview Ground Rules." It's a two-page plus document that explains the do's and don'ts during an interview, the subtle cues that I have, it's a whole buncha stuff, and there is some humor in that. I create it for my members. I share it with others that do my job, but they really can't—they don't get it. It's a little layered and nuanced, I think, for them to fully appreciate it. Because it goes with my conversation afterwards with the person, so. And there's humor in there. And oftentimes members would come back and say, "I really like what you wrote, I appreciate it, it made me laugh, it made me chuckle a couple times." I think humor helps, 'cause they're scared. And laughing kinda relieves that for a second or two at least. They like it. And depending on the day you catch me, my emails will be more colorful sometimes than others, depending on my mood, so yeah it definitely has infiltrated my professional life.

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One of the most remarkable things about my father is the wide range of genres he composes in, a detail that writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) scholars, who articulate the value of writing across disciplinary boundaries and investigate the possibilities of such writing, might be interested in. WAC scholarship articulates the value of writing across disciplinary boundaries and investigates the possibilities of such writing. In their thorough taxonomy of WAC programs across the United States, William Condon and Carol Rutz articulate the subdiscipline's central pedagogical assumptions—that assigning writing is distinct from teaching writing and that as newer members of the academy, students learn to write as they write to learn. According to their 2012 CCC article, the importance of WAC has gained momentum over the past few decades, so the wide sea of genres my father composes in provides a valuable explorative site for an important question: How can we build a more organic impetus for students to compose across disciplines?

Over the course of this interview, my father mentioned poems,

songs, instructional literature, short stories, campaign literature, novels, and screenplay. Of course, this comfort with exploring new genres is not uninfluenced by his years of practice. It is important to articulate here the practical necessity-based “learn on the job” nature of much of Robert’s writing. Superficially, the writing he does for his work as an investigator (the interview guide) and the writing he did as a husband of a person running for local office (campaign literature) are explicit examples of how his specific social location provides the organic rhetorical situations we might advocate for in the composition classroom. However, his comparatively creative writing also emerges from his multiple social locations—as a member of the African diaspora, a citizen of the United States, writing to assert agency for himself and, on occasions when he shares his creative writing with others, by performing ways of knowing.

How can the on-the-spot genre agility Robert details throughout this interview be adjusted for the first-year writing classroom? That his repertoire is part of what most readily identifies him as a writer to others (recipients of his humorous Investigation Rules, his wife’s campaign staff, etc.) is helpful to pedagogues because it can inform the kinds of personalized rhetorical situations that can be identified by students. For instance, what would the genre-awareness assignments we use in many Syracuse University first-year writing classrooms be like if they were based on a foundational understanding that all of our social locations could be explored, or understood, or reacted to using writing? Conceptualizing genre awareness from the material needs of the students rather than a largely arbitrary rhetorical situation invented by an instructor might allow a more equitable exchange between student and professor.

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L: Our final question is about how you imagine impacting your environment, and how your writing has engaged with your environment in the past, and how that has maybe changed over time.

R: It hasn’t engaged much outside of me in the past, other than the Kwanzaa parties that we have every year, that I read my poetry . . . I did write a article once for a magazine that Cucho had started, and I still have that—“Why I Don’t Attend the Puerto Rican Parade.” I’m gonna look back at it, I haven’t read it in a long time. But it’s interesting you ask that question because lately I’ve been thinking of how to, first of all, consolidate everything I have—separate it into poetry, and prose, and essays, and other things. And try to find a way to publish it. I don’t wanna self-publish. So it’s gonna be a lotta work, and a lotta time, because a lotta the stuff is still rough. It was just put out there, and often when I look back at things I fix ‘em and I change ‘em. So, I would do some of that, ‘cause all of this is handwritten. So the first job is to put it on digital, and then catalogue it, and then try to get it published. But the immediate project is the story of the campaign. That’s a novel.

L: I’m really interested in going back to that revising and editing process. What is that like? How do you decide what to go back to?

R: I just flip through it. I take a book, and I’ll start flipping through it. And when I see something that oh, this isn’t done, I left this. Sometimes I’ll stop because there’s a word that needs to be there, and I don’t have it right now. And then I’ll go back, and really shape it. But if that word doesn’t come after a few minutes of staring at it, I’ll leave that poem and go to another one that was started, and I’ll finish the poem that way, and I’ll read it from beginning to end and say hmm . . . now it’s done. Sometimes I think I write the same poem, or parts of it, at different times. Because I’ll start this, and it’ll be titled, and then I think I’m writing another poem, at a whole different time. But it’s the same topic, and it’s along the same lines. And then when I go back and I’m looking, I’m like wait a minute. These two are the same poem, I just need to do this, or change lines, the order of some lines maybe, but we’re talking about the same things here. I like when that happens because it’s the same poem but it feels like almost two different poems within the same poem. That’s when it’s really good.

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My work in writing centers and as a writing instructor has shown me that revision and editing practices are often tough steps in the writing process for many students. Getting their thoughts organized and on paper proves enough of a challenge—working with that writing over time to maximize its effectiveness can seem nearly impossible, especially if you aren’t working with a separate set of eyes like writing tutors, editors, or professors might provide. So, it is helpful to think about my father’s revising and editing practices because they are self-taught and self-imposed, which means internal motivation keeps him consistently tweaking and strengthening his writing.

It matters that Robert’s revising and editing processes are shaped by the situation he is writing for. Many first-year instructors (myself included) use a set editing and revising process across differing genres of writing throughout the semester, either working through “zero drafts,” the widely circulated peer-review cycle, or individual conferences. Rather than a set process, Robert considers different approaches for different types of writing. Poetry gets one treatment, longer works receive a different treatment. Personal writing gets one treatment, professional writing gets a different treatment. When he decides which word “needs to be there,” or whether a work is done, Robert considers the purpose of the work. If he were in a first-year classroom, this would demonstrate the rhetorical awareness that, at Syracuse University, is one of the central learning outcomes in the core writing sequence. By making efforts to adjust editing and revising practices for different genres of writing, Robert engages with revision in a way that operate as a point of access for developing genre awareness.

Also significantly, he reviews entire bodies of work in the form of one notebook or another when he makes edits. In fact, he doesn’t start out by focusing on developing a particular piece; he looks at a collection of writing together and sometimes pieces things together. This approach could provide a valuable shift for composition



classrooms that perhaps unintentionally position inventive work as completely separate from what students ultimately hand in. Many instructors already utilize scaffolding assignments towards students' major semester projects, so requiring students to use their process writing along with peer review to make edits and then possibly reflect on that process doesn't seem like too far from the routine of those classrooms. My father's revising practices also demonstrate the potential of making the complete portfolio of writing toward a single major assignment part of the peer-review process instead of just a draft of that final assignment. This could help writing instructors draw connections for their students between process writing and their final products.

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L: Do you have a collection of poems like that?

R: No. But the revision is really me going back, and saying, "Okay, I'm done here." Or saying, "Oh this really belongs with that, and that's really what I wanna do, is take all that"—I mean, I have a lot. I have a lot of stuff. I don't stop. That's the thing that Cucho gave me that I'll always be grateful for. He gave me the release to just put it all down. That even if it never gets published, your kids, their kids, all our generations are gonna have that to look at. No matter what happens from now 'cause it's on paper, it's there to be like damn, what the hell was he thinking about at that time, or wow, that's what was going on? And listening to other poets has helped me. I heard an interview once; Luis Rey Rivera was interviewing a poet and he was talking about why he writes, what he writes. And he said, "If I'm a poet, I could write about anything. It doesn't matter what the topic is. If you're a poet, you could write," he said. I'll never forget this because I love the way he sounded. He says, "I could write about a bee alighting on a flower. Or I could write about a traffic accident." I was like wow, that's a beautiful thought. So I mean, would I like to be rich off my writing? Absolutely. Wouldn't wanna ever be famous, but if I could sell a screenplay or two, and pay off all the college debt, I'll be so fuckin' happy, I would not know what to do with myself. *Matta fact, lemme ask for more.* If I could sell screenplays enough that I could quit my job and write poetry all day, that's what I would do. That would be great. I would just do that. All over the world. Gimme a beach, gimme a fire . . . things come to me all the time. I can't help it. It's maddening sometimes if I can't write it down. That makes me mad, 'cause then I'll forget. And it was so good, and I'm like damn that was so good! If I'm in traffic, or driving? So I start recording stuff now.

L: Did you get yourself one of these nice recorders?

R: That's what I'm gonna do, that's my next step.

## CONCLUSION

This interview exemplifies the wealth of composition knowledge that exists beyond institutional gates. The development of my

father's writer identity seems at first like a paradox. He was not tasked with writing outside of school, and the writing he was doing in school, as he remembers it, was largely ignored. However, environmental factors like his mother's concern that he do well in school so he could have a better life, the material conditions that compelled his imagination, and the confidence that emerged from comparisons to other, "shabby" writers worked together on my father to develop a long-standing and internally motivated writer identity that impacted his other identities—investigator, father, husband, brother, citizen. It is worth thinking in the first-year writing classroom about how we can develop life-long writers. Although this interview and analysis does not aim to fully articulate a translation of those environmental factors for the first-year writing classroom, it asks whether the imagination and confidence my father describes is present in contemporary first-year writing programs.

His journey to and through his writing identity and his embodiment of that identity through practice also highlight the relevance of writing across the curriculum and complicate how many of us teach genre awareness. I, for instance, am regularly reminding students of all the genres they already write in, and all the disciplines they already write across by virtue of existing on the internet. Even I have to agree though that the short bursts of text that often characterize contemporary life are limited in the writing practice they encourage. My father's genre utility belt asks us to examine where all these varied rhetorical situations come from. Not only is Robert distinctly aware of the discourse communities to which he belongs, something we ask students to examine as part of their first-year education at Syracuse, but he positions writing for himself as always able to serve a purpose connected with his particular location in different discourse communities. This paper asks how we can foster that pervasive rhetorical awareness in first-year students, an awareness that situates writing as both thinking and doing in a direct concrete relationship with students' lives outside of the academy.

That the rhetorical situations my father responds to emerge from his material, social, and political conditions is not unrelated to his holistic approach to editing and revising. Unlike in the classroom, his process work is not the product of homework assignments and in-class writing but is immediate responses to any given rhetorical situation. And so, when the writing is to be shared (like a song for campaign staff to chant while handing out literature, an essay for a friend's website, or a poem to be shared at a celebration), editing any single piece requires a survey of an entire body of work that he "flips through," and the "final" product emerges from this melting pot of writing. How can we teach students to honor all the phases of their writing in this way? This paper wonders about the potential benefits of using, in Syracuse University's first-year writing for instance, ALL of the students' writing as material to examine for peer review.

The possibilities this paper imagines being informed by my father's



insight and practices push back against some of the structural realities of first-year writing programs. Student/instructor ratios, semester calendars, and standards of the academic credit hour all pose possible obstacles to the more individually personalized, imaginative, and slightly disjointed processes that have fostered the development of my father's writing. This is perhaps the most significant insight his interview provides. That is, it shows us ways in which structural and institutional conditions of university-level writing classrooms work to prevent the development of life-long writers who understand composing as an important part of not only various types of paid labor (as we remind students who question the importance of writing courses) but also of expressing agency, engagement, and collective action. Many writing programs struggle with the line between advocating for writing studies as a legitimate discipline and teaching skills-based first-year writing courses that position writing as nothing more than an introductory requirement. Although he mentions that our interview was the first occasion he'd been asked at length about his writing, he articulated that relationship that is at the foundation of his identity as a writer and that is essential for our students—writing “to better understand the world, and [our] place in it.”

## FURTHER RESEARCH

This interview and analysis is a small piece of a much broader inquiry—why are black students consistently falling behind in writing classrooms and what can be done about it? Although there are many known systemic factors that present obstacles to black students' success in all areas of the academy, as a writing instructor and a PhD student concerned with pedagogy, I wonder what can be done in the classroom specifically and in writing programs more generally that can mitigate the impact of these obstacles, or even better, eliminate them. Although pedagogues over the last several decades have developed approaches to teaching first-year writing that consider the above inquiries, the obstacles to black student success remain. So, my work now invites scholars to continue searching outside of institutional gates for pedagogical insight, in conjunction with unpacking the pervasive systemic inequities that prevent radical scholars' work from being put into widespread effect. One possible line of inquiry looks to the past: identifying and examining successful black pedagogues in the United States to identify qualities that characterize generative black teacher/black student dynamics.

I do not take lightly the knowledges I hold—both academic and cultural—about successful black writers and educators of all kinds, and I hope this interview serves as one entry point of many to and through what pedagogical approaches have even the capacity to produce that kind of writer. Thinking about some of the most prolific black writers—Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, Malcolm X, Alice Walker—the projects I am pursuing over the next several years concern the commitment to black liberation that seems to be at the heart of developing such writing. In the face of all its obstacles,

I assert that one cannot commit to such an undertaking without genuine love and respect for oneself and others, yes between student and teacher, but especially where writing is self-taught. By characterizing black teacher/black student dynamics in the United States throughout time, I aim to articulate particular definitions of love and respect that I imagine provide the foundation for a mutual commitment to liberation at the heart of so many varied compositions by black writers—from slave narratives to Black Twitter.

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*Robert: I would like to pay homage to my mother who instilled an appreciation for learning, integrity, and diligence and my daughter whose strength, resilience and brilliance has been a source of inspiration.*