
Love Letter to Kynard



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Vani Kannan is an assistant professor of English at Lehman College, C.U.N.Y. She teaches composition/rhetoric, creative non-fiction and literature classes and co-directs Writing Across the Curriculum. Her writing grows out of women-of-color/transnational feminist histories and ongoing struggles.



Sherita V. Roundtree is an assistant professor at Towson University who studies approaches for developing diverse representation and equitable access for students, teachers, and scholars who write in, instruct in, and theorize about writing classrooms. More specifically, Dr. Roundtree's current work centralizes the teaching efficacy, pedagogical approaches, and "noise" of Black women graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) who teach or have taught first- and/or second-level composition courses. Considering Black women GTAs' feelings of preparedness and approaches to teaching composition, she explores the networks of support they utilize and how they do or do not use resources to navigate pedagogical challenges. In this sense, Dr. Roundtree's research lies at the intersections of Composition Studies, Black feminist theories and pedagogies, community literacy, and writing program administration. Her work has appeared in *Community Literacy Journal*, *Prose Studies*, *Writing Program Administration*, and *Studies in Writing and Rhetoric*.



B. López is a PhD student in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program at Syracuse University. They are an instructor and writing consultant for the Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition department. They received their M.A. in Rhetoric and Writing Studies at San Diego State University and their B.A. in English at UC Berkeley. They are from Southern California specifically from the Inland Empire. B.'s research interests are the following: Queer archives, trans oral histories, sound studies, gender and sexuality studies, multicultural rhetoric, and popular culture. During their free time, they enjoy spending time with loved ones (including their cat), exploring different food spots, and watching movies.



Yanira Rodríguez is an assistant professor of Journalism and Writing at West Chester University. Her teaching and research focus on community writing/publishing and the politics of cultural production as tools for social justice and liberation within and beyond the academy; multimodal/multigenre compositions which foreground anti-racism, decolonization and abolition as explicit end goals; the politics of place and context; and intersectional women of color feminisms. Her writing has appeared in *Community Literacy Journal*, *Computers and Composition Digital Press*, the edited collection *Unruly Rhetorics: Protest, Persuasion and Publics* and *Radical Teacher*.

Abstract

This is a collectively-written love letter in response to Carmen Kynard's "On Graduate Admissions and Whiteness: A Love Letter to Black/Brown/Queer Graduate Students Out There Everywhere." While our letter is from some of us who gathered to commune with Dr. Kynard at the CCW2019, we recognize that the "we" of folks Dr. Kynard has impacted through her work and presence is much broader. We see this as a living love letter and hope others will contribute their voices.

Keywords

intergenerational community, accountability, cultural work, collective liberation, multimodal insurgent knowledges, radical mentorship

[Click here to listen to our letters](#)

WE READ YOUR LETTER...

Dear Dr. Kynard,

We write you today from a deep sense of intergenerational accountability and reach (Gumbs 301). We read your “On Graduate Admissions and Whiteness: A Love Letter to Black/Brown/ Queer Graduate Students Out There Everywhere” and bear witness to the principled commitment you made to tell us truths about the violent workings of the institution, truths often denied to us and/or mapped onto us as incompetence.

We want you to know we receive your transmitted knowledges, knowledges that are anti-imperialist and diasporic, knowledges that seek to dismantle white supremacy and settler colonialism, feminist knowledges rooted in Black radicalism, knowledges of generations that survive and grow between time and space at times lying in wait and brought into articulation out of urgent necessity.

We engage in this intergenerational reach as a refusal of Black death, patriarchy and capitalism (which are socially reproduced) (Gumbs 44).

In our refusal we turn toward you and those who through their labor create spaces for us and for whom and with whom we want to keep creating spaces of survival. We commit to engage in ancestor-accountable knowledge making and practice (Pritchard). We write to you as a commitment to radical love in the here and now.

While our letter is from some of us who gathered to commune with you at the Conference on Community Writing 2019 we recognize that the “we” of folks you have impacted through your work and presence is much broader.

**A REVOLUTION CAPABLE OF
HEALING OUR WOUNDS. IF WE'RE
THE ONES WHO CAN IMAGINE IT,
IF WE'RE THE ONES WHO DREAM
ABOUT IT, IF WE'RE THE ONES WHO
NEED IT MOST, THEN NO ONE ELSE
CAN DO IT. WE'RE THE ONES.
— AURORA LEVINS MORALES**

We see this as a living love letter and our hope is others in their own time will add their narratives to it and join us in a principled commitment:

*to intergenerational
collective liberation.*

*to people above
institutions and their
systems of reward,
punishment and
containment*

*to learn each other's discreet
histories and risks*

*to challenge, and dismantle
within ourselves, neoliberal
notions of individual success that
displace horizontal work towards
collective liberation*

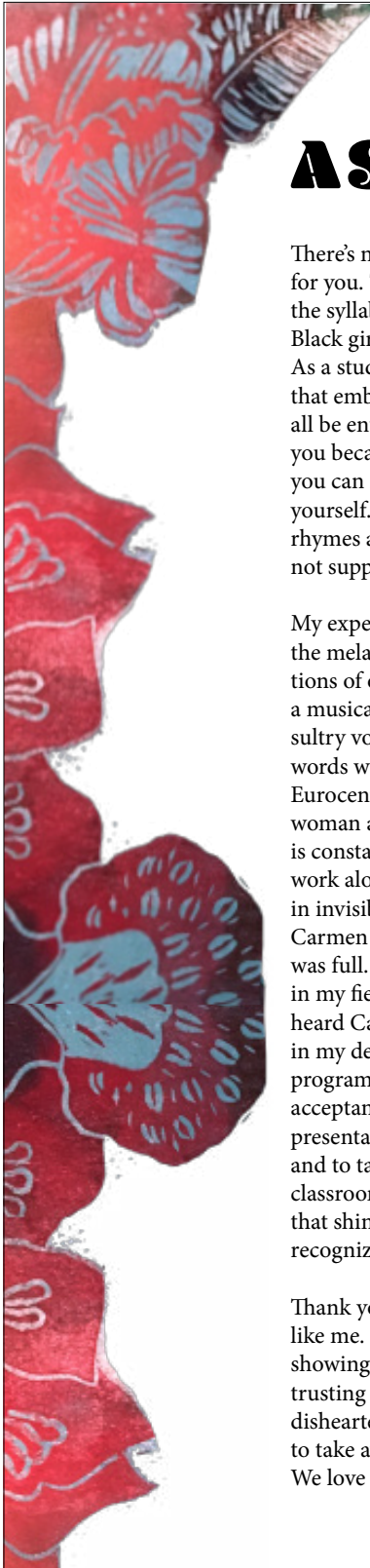
*to interrupt whitening,
capitalist discourses of
professionalism*

*to making visible radical,
insurgent knowledges, histories,
traditions in our classrooms and
to take a lead from them in our
writing and creations*

*to cultivate spaces of livability
and healing*

*to a livening pedagogy, to
co-creating cultural work
toward liberation as we
foreground multiple ways of
knowing and making meaning*

*to imagining and building
liberated futures*



A Song For Carmen

by Benesemon Simmons

There's no love in the academy for a Black girl: because the institution ain't built for you. There's no salutation in the graduate classroom for a Black girl: because the syllabus don't include you. There's no peace in the privacy of mere thought as a Black girl: because the trauma of your very Blackness is conditioned to haunt you. As a student, you then seek mentorship that understands the violence, scholarship that embraces the struggle, and community that soothes your spirit—hoping it will all be enuf: hoping it will dispel the darkness that threatens to steadily consume you because your presence is met with impalpable resistance (that they can't see but you can feel) and represents a question you're seldom given permission to answer yourself. You must ask, can somebody/anybody sing a Black girl song? because the rhymes and rhythms of the institution don't move to the beat of your beauty: it's not supposed to. But some are brave and sing these songs anyway.

My experience as a graduate student has been filled with the syncopation of jazz, the melancholy of the blues, and the audacity of hip hop, along with the compositions of other genres. But eventually I encountered Carmen Kynard, who embodied a musical genre all her own: it was unique and its leading practice was truth. Her sultry voice sang melodies challenging institutional power and oppression. Her words were uplifting and she left me with material lessons I couldn't get from the Eurocentric curricula being emphasized in my graduate coursework. But as a Black woman and PhD student, the intense hostility inherent in the fibers of academia is constant, especially when your identity unfairly permits others to evaluate your work alongside your worth. Such power structures are painful and paralyzing, even in invisible ways. So when I was introduced to the intellectual masterpiece that is Carmen Kynard, I felt understood and appreciated. Her work fed my soul, and I was full. She made space for me in her scholarship, and she helped me see a future in my field of study: the point where I entered rhetoric and composition is when I heard Carmen Kynard speak to me. She was assigned by the only woman of color in my department, the first week of class during the second semester of my PhD program. The beginning of that semester marked the beginning of hope and acceptance. A year later Dr. Kynard was invited to my university and gave presentations that continued to encourage me to be "Free to. . .Be Black As Hell" and to take pride in my "#BlackGirlMagic" especially as a student in the writing classroom. I got an opportunity to meet her and she exuded the same fire in person that shines through her writing. Her presence was validating and helped me recognize my own value.

Thank you, Carmen Kynard, for always using your voice to empower Black girls like me. For giving us the courage to speak up and live our genius out loud. For showing us that taking risks can be an act of resistance. For teaching us that trusting in ourselves is to also claim our own survival. The PhD process can be disheartening, but your lyrics of love help sustain what the academy is determined to take away. Thank you for your support, giving us strength, and singing our song. We love you, because you help us love ourselves.

Vani Kannan | Assistant Professor of English | Lehman College, C.U.N.Y.



With Us

by Vani Kannan

Las Vegas, 2013, Wednesday afternoon, the second semester of my master's program and my first time at a composition and rhetoric conference. I was with a friend, and neither of us knew how to navigate the conference or make sense of it. So we ducked into the first workshop we found. And there you were, at the front of the room.

I didn't know your name, had not been introduced to your scholarship, and was in an MA program at a 93% white university in an 87% white state. In this context I was beginning to figure out how to materially work against a classroom culture that 7% of us had to endure daily.

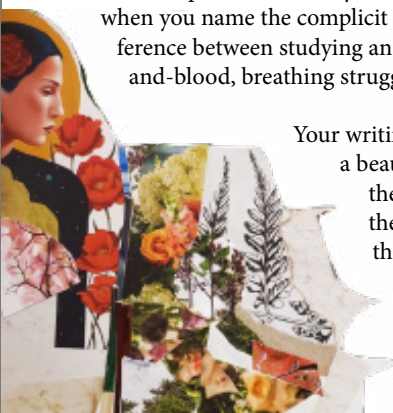
What I remember most about this first encounter with you was that as you shared the racist bullshit you and your students had been dealing with, it was clear that you were speaking with your students – deeply *with*, not *for* or *about*.

Four years later, in 2017, you came to the 8AM panel Yanira Rodríguez, Ben Kuebrich and I did called “Policing the Campus Community.” Dr. Eric Pritchard and Dr. E. were with you. We cannot tell you what that meant—that you chose to be with us on that early morning.

In August of 2018, you called me on the phone before I began working at a campus where you used to teach. You corroborated my uneasy sense that CUNY, for all its insurgent student movements, has a parallel history of white missionary teachers. I cannot tell you what that meant—that you took the time to give me your own “disorientation guide” to CUNY.

In October of 2019, you sat with a group of us in the corner of a student center in Philadelphia so we could ask you questions and share our frustration, sorrow, and tenuous hope. You generously shared your time, energy, and spirit. Years ago a friend described movements as spaces to “collect our people,” and sitting around that table it became clear your writing collects people too.

I remember these dates—2013, 2017, 2018, 2019—because these were the moments you taught me these lessons. When you speak I hear insurgent histories and dreams speaking through you and hear you carrying forward their fierce promise. When you share stories from your classrooms in your talks, articles, or interchapters, and when you name the complicit actors surrounding these classrooms, you give us the language to name the difference between studying an academic objectified version of “justice” or “solidarity,” and living it as a flesh-and-blood, breathing struggle.



Your writings and words have made a home in my consciousness: not an easy home, but a beautiful and challenging kind of home that asks me each day whether I will make the choice to default to inherited, deadening assimilatory aspirations or nurture the queer insurgent dreams that live between the branches of family trees and in the cracks and corners of universities.

Sherita V. Roundtree | Assistant Professor | *Townson University*

We See Each Other

by **Sherita V.
Roundtree**

“I see you.” Your words reverberate off my rib cage like the vocals of a Black feminist choir—deep and soul shaking. In the white noise of academia, it is difficult to recognize those melodies that call us home and back again but we still try. It is difficult to also be seen (or allow ourselves to be seen) in the complexity of our blackness when academia commodifies Black folks for institutional diversity initiatives but vilifies the Black and indignant, Black and dejected, and Black and resistant. But we still show up.



As you have taught us, we must be intentional in our work and actions. To be Black and present is a political act. But the work of being present is not an easy task. For most of graduate school, I forgot what I looked like and it became more difficult to be fully present. Years of having my body and presence be a hyperfocus of analysis by students, peers, and faculty led to me compartmentalizing my identities as a means of survival to the point that I no longer recognized myself. Even though I have strong, Black women mentors who stand in the gap for me, I know

what is at stake when we put all of our energy into supporting our communities without first taking self-inventory. We must see ourselves but sometimes that first happens through the process of being seen.

I first met you in 2016 when you came to Ohio State to deliver a lecture and graduate workshop for the Edward P.J. Corbett Lecture and the Black Lives Matter in the Classroom Symposium that took place that year. Although I am sure you were not aware of it, your writing had mentored and sustained me for a long time and the thought of meeting you felt overwhelming. What does a person say to someone whose writing has helped them to survive? But the moment you set foot on campus, you made every effort to commune with us and recognize our full selves. When I saw you again at the Conference on Community Writing in 2017 and 2019, I watched you go out of your way to let me know you saw me. I have listened as you’ve echoed the words of graduate students in recognition of their voices.

As I reflect on being seen, I often think of sitting in the light. My mom has said she had a vision of me before I was born and I was being held up before her by a community of Black women and men. Therefore, when I was born, it was a reunion; my mom had already seen and knew me before the light. Your work, mentorship, and presence continue to show me that you see me in the light and that you hold space for me. Your words and your actions remind me that you continue to see us even when we find it hard to see ourselves, to find ourselves. Thank you for helping us to return to ourselves so we can come home and back again.

B. López | PhD student in Composition and Cultural Rhetoric | Syracuse University

the first of many thank yous

by B. López

Dear Carmen Kynard,

Grad school is a lonely process and oftentimes I find myself compromising for the sake of my survival. For grad courses, we read texts from the canon and critique what's been excluded. Surprise, surprise, it's us, we're not represented in the texts. Being in grad school is hard enough and it's harder when you know damn well the institution isn't built for you. I don't think the word *hard* even begins to describe the erasure, the displacement, the imposter syndrome, the internal questioning, and the types of institutional fuckery that occur. I raise the same questions that are the questions I embody: What about queer and trans communities of color? What can be done to prioritize these folks' knowledge making? How can we discuss our struggles without creating harm in the process? The typical "hmmms" and "nods" circulate in class.

I haven't even met you but I feel seen by you.

I'm in class but, i'm not here mentally. Grad students sit around this stupid fucking rectangular table and we all look at each other while we engage in discussion. Do you know how some instructors structure their classrooms in circles? This class is structured around this rectangular table. *Click. Click. Click.* Deep breaths. Coffee cup rims in the mouths of practically everyone. Numerical grey digits blink on my silver casio watch.

I count. each. hour. each. hour.

that passes by
and I count the times I s p e a k.

Am I doing a disservice to myself and to my communities when I don't speak? Or am I preserving myself when I think about the ways that white peers will write down what I say and piggyback off of my ideas? It doesn't matter because regardless of what I do or don't do, i'll be scrutinized anyway.

Did you feel this way during coursework too?

I first encountered your work in my first year of my grad program. When I was reading your work, I had to pause to hold back my tears. I paused and took a deep breath and wrote notes for my weekly reading response. How has academia influenced the ways I react to texts? I'm tired. I'm tired of being devalued and seen as less than in an institution that will **never** prioritize me. I'm tired of talking about how white the field is. I'm tired of the violence.

The violence--socializing with white academics who don't really care about me (it doesn't matter if I want to or not they will greet me and act entitled to a greeting from me, something, anything to prove they aren't racist), acting like I have my shit together in class (don't let my anger and sadness fool you, I'm intelligent but sometimes all factors combined convince me I don't have it together), holding my anger and sadness in during class, sharing my thoughts and not being responded to in the ways my answers deserve, feeling like my input doesn't matter, being in class. i'm tired of reading texts that don't include me.

i'm tired of being here.

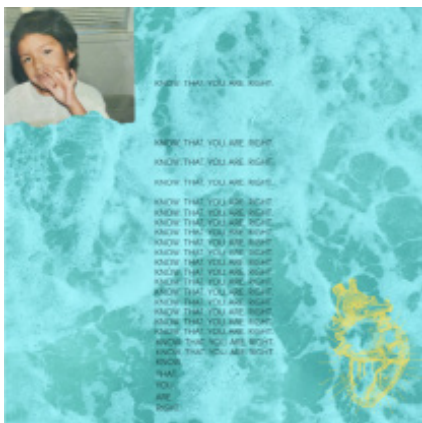
When I read your "A Love Letter to Black/ Brown / Queer Doctoral Students Everywhere" I allowed myself to cry. My tears created rust on the parts of me that have been robotically shaped by a capitalist mindset. Sometimes I deny my body rest despite all the self-care talk I preach to my loved ones, but when I read your

B. López | PhD student in Composition and Cultural Rhetoric | *Syracuse University*

words I was *finally* able to rest. Thank you. Thank you. Thank YOU. I think if my grandma could thank you she would reach out for your hands, gently hold them and look in to your eeyes and say “gracias por cuidar a mi cielo y espero que recibas todas las bendiciones que mereces.” She’d close that off with a prayer and ask her God to protect you and give you blessings. Like her prayers that protect me, your words guide me and remind me that I am a *blessing*. Your words gave me the care I needed (and still need). I felt grounded when you said:

The fact of the matter is that there were equally qualified Brown and Black candidates who never got chosen simply because they did not perform whiteness in the way that white applicants do. White graduate students (and their faculty/staff cronies) need to stop assuming that they wrote better essays, got better test scores, had better letters of reference, or had better anything. They only had whiteness.

You have no idea how many times i’ve questioned myself since starting this doctoral journey and all this time i thought it was because I wasn’t doing something right. Well, technically i’m doing something wrong--i’m not performing or prioritizing (nor will i ever) the whiteness the academy craves. If we are to prioritize your words, Carmen Kynard, then we must affirm our existence in the academy because the foundations of white supremacy don’t want us to know we are all feeling similarly. In fact, they want me to feel lonely because it’s that much easier for me to disassociate than to have the energy to organize with other Black and brown comrades. Like DJ Khaled once said, “They don’t want you to win, they don’t want you to prosper, they don’t want u to succeed.” To add to what Khaled preaches, they don’t want us to call out the racism that occurs in coursework and in other processes of grad programs like scholarships that award normative linear time performances. And they don’t want us to call out all the times they steal and colonize our ideas. Yo this truth you share for me is necessary, but it also makes me sad as hell because i still have some time until i finish my doctoral program. And also because I’ve had to explain to white people why Black, indigenous, and students of color need support in our program and why we need our own space away from the whiteness of the program. Even though i shouldn’t be explaining this, i have fallen into the trap of questioning myself and think that maybe i am just overreacting or maybe im not being understanding. Self-described white allies or well-intentioned white peers talk about antiracist approaches, yet they have no idea how much space they take up and don’t know all the ways they demand reactions/knowledge from us. When i feel the weight of all of this, “like the cards have been stacked against [me],” I tell myself this new mantra you lovingly crafted, “KNOW. THAT. YOU. ARE. RIGHT.”



And so, tonight I return to your letter and play Frank Ocean’s new music: two magical moments combined and worth documenting. In the intro of Ocean’s new song “DHL” he sings:

*Love that I
Love that I give
That is not love that I get from you*

This part of his song is almost difficult to hear because it’s high pitched and sounds more like instrumental beats. But if you listen closely (and look up the lyrics), you can hear that distorted voice giving us the love we are all looking for. These lyrics, like your words, remind me to embrace my TRUTH and to not give love to the academy that doesn’t give me love. But badass Black and women of color and femmes of color like you deserve all of my love because y’all make me believe I will be okay. Because the truth is that y’all are out here changing the futurity of the field.

Y’all are the future and because of y’all **we** are the future too.

This is the first of many thank you letters to you.

Con amor,
A sad ass, queer and trans brown scholar
B. López

Yanira Rodríguez | Assistant Professor of Journalism and Writing | West Chester University

CORAJE, VISIONES Y ESPACIOS

BY YANIRA RODRÍGUEZ

In dominicanx speak, courage and anger share a word, *coraje*. My anger over early experiences in higher ed and as a PhD student compacted into stones.

Pero, as a *carajita*, a kid who grew up in the Bronx and the D.R. and who learned to make sling shots alongside other kids, *también aprendimos que hacer con las piedras*, we know what to do with stones. From the start of the program I was in fights over the exigences that ground our work and our commitment to justice. And because I refused the stories they told, the containment mechanisms came quick. They manifested as bad grades based on whim and affect; as good grades framed as gifts and not the product of my labor; as alienation for not sanctioning problematic practices; as surprise that I thrived despite rejecting their white sponsorship.

Mi coraje was not over people having different visions of liberation, which is a context-specific necessity. **Mi coraje** was not over levels of political wokeness for we ain't fully formed, our miseducation has been extensive and our unlearning will not be instantaneous.

My anger was in response to witnessing how systems of reward, punishment and recognition were deployed to contain those of us with radical dreams of what education could make possible.

My anger was in response to the institutional expectation that we capitalize on or become brokers of communities we are politically accountable to. My anger was in response to how Latinx students are invited and groomed into antiblack complicity. My anger was in response to the coercion mechanisms in place to make some accept that invitation and in response to others who did so willingly.

It ain't easy to unlearn the kind of cunning they try to teach you, one that uses time to fix reality and reframes history in order to claim and collect. When you refuse those toxic lessons and relationalities, you are alienated even by those you thought had your back. It's an equally painful, clarifying and grounding experience, one that opens you to different *visions, lenguajes, and lineages*.

I found your writings in the opening that came through refusal. They created a space for belonging, a sci-fi scape for reimagining, a space of collective affirmation. I imagine many others have experienced a similar sense of being transported through texts when reading Black Third World feminists writings and poetry. An experience of words offering answers to one's longing for redress, speaking that which one had no language for, weaving one into existence. And through that weaving:

You taught me to trust the dissonance I was experiencing and to bear witness and turn the mirror back on those who like *los perritos de pedro parmo, tiran la piedra y esconden la mano**. You taught me we already have the home languages to name what we witness. You taught me to reclaim the stories weaponized against us, to sling them back. You taught me that the consequences of not speaking the truth are dire, that to teach means to be willing to die for/alongside our students. You taught me that kind of commitment turns us toward a pedagogy of life. You taught me our histories are discreet but our struggles are shared and love letters are political acts of intergenerational reach. **Y aquí estoy**, reaching through the future-past,
llena de gratitud.

*The original phrase is *como las gatitas de Maria Ramos, que tiran la piedra y esconden la mano*. It is a phrase that circulates in daily speak in the D.R. and Cuba and likely other parts of the Caribbean and Latin America. It loosely translates to "like Maria Ramos' cats, you throw the stone and hide the hand." But as I searched its history, I found the phrase is said to be connected to the trials of Maria Ramos, a sex worker who killed her abusive pimp with a stone and when questioned said, "I wasn't there, ask my cats." Since that's my kind of sister, I reclaim and recast the phrase as *los perritos de pedro parmo*.

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Acknowledgments

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