WCC

WRITERS: CRAFT & CONTEXT

Vol. 1 | No. 1

TONY RADLE *OU DAILY*

Editors' Introduction

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Our collective vision for *Writers: Craft & Context* began to germinate 1.5 years ago when the three of us looked around at the state of academic publishing. Like many, we were frustrated with the lack of equitable representation on editorial teams, editorial boards, among published authors, and in accepted expressions of scholarly writing. We saw an opportunity for those of us who write, teach writing, and study writers to draw more fully on the dynamic types of composing we do to more fully represent, support, and value the lived experience of writers. We craved a collaborative, generative space for scholars of all stripes—from across disciplines, from within and beyond the academy—to share and learn from poetry, interviews, letters, creative nonfiction, pedagogical reflection, parable, architecture, and more.

Pursuing our vision for such a space was necessary and urgent, we realized, because although the field of writing studies boasts a long history of resisting standardization, those values do not always play out in published scholarship. The three of us were aware of meaningful work, including our own, that would never "fit" in the current landscape of scholarly publishing because it refuses to be standardized. That reality was troubling on many levels. Of course the field is missing out by failing to be shaped by those voices and projects; scholarly conversations remain untouched by insights that matter now more than ever; scores of readers are resigned to the fact that they will never read their stories, see their realities in the field's published literature. What's more, these "misfit" writers are forced to suffer a traumatizing, inhumane cycle of submission and rejection, compelled to try again and again to fit their feet into misshapen shoes crafted by a meritocratic system that was never designed to work for them.

In light of the budding movement toward inclusive publishing, we realized nothing short of transformation would address the interconnected problems we observed in our field. We began to imagine a journal that would disrupt the system on multiple fronts, that would actively confront the standardization of writing—in form and process—that would resist the burgeoning neoliberal agenda that seems to justify, perpetuate, and sustain the very forces we felt compelled to resist. In an effort to push against forms of oppression through standardization, we frame our ideological goals for this journal with critical lenses that challenge dominant ideologies and liberal claims of neutrality, equal opportunity, objectivity, color blindness, and merit in the craft and publication of writing (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006, p. 4; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 313). In response to a lack of inclusivity, justice, and access to publishing, we challenge dominant ideologies perpetuated through standardization of content and process. Doing so is difficult because of resistance from those who invoke abstract liberal concepts like equal opportunity—a concept not easily examined when the ideology supporting this concept finds its foundation in hegemonic beliefs and practices of meritocracy. However, too many established journals claim neutrality in their selection of

Our Open Journal System (OJS) platform is maintained at the University of Oklahoma. We'd like to acknowledge that site as supportive, but also troubling. Oklahoma is home to 39 tribal nations, each of which has a distinctive culture, history, and government. We acknowledge that the history of the university and the state represents settler colonialism and remains in tension with what we now understand about the lands proclaimed "unassigned" and opened for white settlement in 1889.

scholarship and justify the rejection of genre-pushing projects on the "colorblind" basis of merit and "fit." Each of us has witnessed and experienced the effects of dominant ideologies on and as writers. From our collective lived experiences, we know how real people are affected by hostility and hate every day. As our personal origin stories are an important driver of our collective vision for the journal, we share them now.

SANDY'S STORY

I came to this project as a writer who has had trouble finding the right venue for my research on the lived experiences of faculty writers. I found myself making the argument again and again that writing studies should pay attention to this particular group of writers and doing backflips to convince reviewers for mainstream journals that their readers had a stake in what I had to offer. How could my findings possibly matter to readers who worked with undergraduate or graduate writers, but not faculty? Of course the fact that reviewers and readers did not see themselves *as* faculty writers with something to gain from my research, nor acknowledge the role they play in the lives of faculty writers as mentors, chairs, peer evaluators, tenure-committee members, reviewers, editors, etc., was part of the point I was trying to make about how we ignore the development of faculty writers to our detriment.

I've had trouble convincing my institution to fund my research as well. I've collected the following feedback from grant award committees: "The PI does not address this project as an intervention which could have more impact in the context of research." "The plan has very little scientific rigor . . . approach is not randomized . . . project is backward looking with no real predictive powers . . . unclear that the results can be generalizable to a larger scholarly community . . . seems to be little impact potential on this field or any other." These responses are disheartening, especially as I repeatedly hear from faculty in my study, particularly women and faculty from minoritized and underrepresented groups, how institutional structures, such as internal grant criteria and procedures, tenure and promotion processes, and scholarly review and publication practices are soul-sucking, cruel, disheartening, and traumatizing. The disconnect between writers' experiences and the institution's and field's interest in understanding and supporting them is striking. It has fueled my conviction that writers need a place (many places) to read and publish about writers and the work of writing.

AJA'S STORY

My experiences with publishing and journals are not (to this point) in editing but as an author who has had to shop around my work in critical race counterstory to several different journals. As nothing is beyond critique, my work in counterstory has experienced its share of skeptics, detractors, and naysayers. As Catherine Prendergast (2003) has observed, counterstorytellers "have often been noted (and often faulted) not so much for their arguments—*what* they are saying—as for their departures from standard . . . discourse—*how* they are saying" (p. 46). In my experience, reviewers for mainstream journals in rhetoric and writing studies express an interest in genre-pushing work yet still insist this work must be amenable to mainstream writing standards.

Exemplary counterstory writer and teller Derrick Bell (1995) has said these critics "are not reluctant to tell us what [the writing] ought to be. They question the accuracy of the stories, fail to see their relevance, and want more of an analytical dimension to the work—all this while claiming that their critiques will give this writing a much-needed "legitimacy' in the academic world" (p. 907). Critical race theorists Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2017) advise that this kind of response should come as no surprise, as the critiques of counterstory demonstrate that this sort of feedback is nothing original, field specific, or new. Paradigms resist change, and methods and genres that seek to challenge and change reigning paradigms historically spark stubborn resistance (p. 102). I believe *Writers: Craft and Context* is a fitting endeavor to join in with my fellow editors and authors as we embark on crafting meaningful genre- and boundary-shattering work.

MICHELE'S STORY

WCC caps my experience editing two journals. But the *aims and scope* of those journals (*Kansas English* and *The Writing Center Journal*) are set by larger institutional bodies. We envisioned a journal of our own invention that could provide a new space for fresh aims and scope defined by the writers themselves. We wanted to invite new knowers who resist privileging only argument and evidence bound up in traditional forms and genres. We wanted to *show,* not tell, how we value lived experience, epistemic diversity, and the ways art can help us understand writers and writing. As someone who is "phasing out" of professional life, I can think of no more satisfying and creative way for me to do some of my favorite things—work with writers, learn with these editors, and write my own poetry again.

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Thus, our vision for *Writers: Craft and Context* aims for a "narrative plentitude" in the ways Viet Thanh Nguyen (2018) describes, with a goal of radical inclusivity that aspires for diverse crafts and contexts to expand representation in this journal. We, the managing editors, along with our large collaborative editorial team, recognize that the journal's "vibrancy, relevance, and, most crucially, ethical core depend on a consistent, rigorous, and measurable commitment to addressing [scholarly publication's] exclusionary history with regard to people of color, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, non-citizens, and those who stand at the intersections of these identities and more" (Calafell, 2019). Therefore, *WCC* is a site for "inclusion activism" that seeks to "challenge operations

that exclude and diminish the experience and knowledge of some while propping up that of others, and to be supportive of those who have not traditionally had access to or representation within field conversations" (Blewett, LaVecchia, Micciche, & Morris, 2017, pp. 274–275). For us, that means holding ourselves, authors, reviewers, and board members accountable to the writers and communities with, about, and for whom we publish (Gumbs, 2019; Pritchard, 2019). In a departure from traditional academic journals, we promise to be a venue for writers "to speak with (rather than for and over) others' communities" (Black, Latinx, American Indian et al., 2018). We've made inclusive citation practices part of our review criteria in ways that resist the all-too-common "rhetorical tokenism that leads to a lack of recognition of the fullness of people's contributions" (Pritchard, 2019). Through these commitments, we seek to "enlarge and help to grow our scholarly communities rather than follow well-worn grooves" (Blewett et al., 2017, p. 275).

Toward that end, *Writers: Craft & Context* seeks to publish a wide array of material focused on writers: the work they do, the contexts in which they compose and circulate their work, how they are impacted by policies and pedagogies (broadly conceived), and how they develop across the lifespan. Given our goals for the journal, including equitable representation of writers, experiences, expertise, and perspectives, it is important to us that our wide target audience have access to our content. We see open access as a vital part of democratizing knowledge construction and knowledge sharing. We are invested in publishing contributions from a range of academic fields such as writing studies, cultural studies, education, psychology, sociology, literature, and modern languages, as well as from community experts outside academia, including program leaders, activists, volunteers, artists, and others who see, support, and do the work of writing in nonacademic contexts. As you will note from the contents of our inaugural issue, we publish traditional and creative genres including research articles, reflections on methodology, pedagogy pieces, collaborative or multivoice works, collages, essays, creative nonfiction, interviews, and more. Our flexibility with genre allows for new ways of thinking, composing, and meaning making as we invite authors to pursue shared goals through innovative methods.

Inaugural Issue

This particular issue beautifully represents the sheer range of genres our journal supports and is invested in publishing. Too many have had negative experiences with publishing, experiences that evidence epistemic exclusion (Buchanan, Dotson, O'Rourke, Rinkus, Settles, & Vasko, 2017) in which genre-pushing pieces that reflect authentic intellectual engagement between knowers and how they know are often rejected. In addition to a range of genres, this issue highlights a diversity of contributors. We hear from life-long writers who are at various stages along the continuum of publishing experience, spanning from early-career academic writers to long-established writer-scholars. Some of our authors have breathed new life into texts they never thought they'd publish; academics who are also poets and creative writers composing outside standard academic boundaries have found *WCC* a welcome venue.

In "We Read Your Letter," Yanira Rodríguez, Benesemon Simmons, Vani Kannan, Sherita V. Roundtree, and B. López, a collective of early-career professors and doctoral students, have crafted a letter written to and in praise of teacher-scholar-activist Dr. Carmen Kynard. Through this epistolary engagement, Rodriguez et. al respond to Kynard's "On Graduate Admissions and Whiteness: A Love Letter to Black/Brown/ Queer Graduate Students Out There Everywhere" with modalities that range from poetry, to visual imagery, to sound recordings, to creative approaches in layout and design. The authors collectively engage Kynard's message with their own message of radical feminist love, coalition, and solidarity in refusal of the academy's imperialistic violences that aim to create fissures between and amongst Black/Brown/Queer/Indigenous graduate students of color. Aside from the important message contained within this letter, this contribution is a brilliantly conceived and executed example of the genre and modality-specific possibilities we invite potential authors to imagine for their own contributions to this journal.

Demonstrating a range of contexts, with particular focus on relationships among people in specific places, poet and writing instructor Silke Feltz offers three poems entitled "Daughter of India," "rockstar, revisited," and "We Left Texas on Cinco de Mayo." In "Daughter of India," Feltz takes her readers 'round the track on a run with sensory detail that evokes a pumping heart and the heat of sensation. "rockstar, revisited" will wash over readers like a smooth and melancholy breeze of nostalgia. This tribute emanates an aching for moments long ago and longed for but no longer part of the present or the future. Rounding out Feltz's contribution is "We Left Texas on Cinco de Mayo," a poem lauded by a reviewer as speaking eloquently "to the pain of moving in life, in relationships, but also the hope for something new on the horizon." Feltz's attentiveness to the sonic dynamics of storytelling makes her poems a welcome genre-option contribution to this issue.

Lida Colón presents an interview with her father, Robert Colón, titled "Telling Stories to Anyone Who Will Listen." Through this interview, interspersed with critical self-reflection and critique, Colón meditates on aspects of writing, revision, and storytelling through an intergenerational lens between the author and her father, Robert. A first-year doctoral student in Syracuse's Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program, Colón's exploration of self within a writing context is informative and illuminating, as her presentation of Robert's story assists readers in identifying connections we too often neglect between the lived practice of writing and scholarship. Robert, an engaging interview subject, walks us through his writing process, growth, exploration, and revision practices as Colón lovingly illustrates the connections between who Robert is as a

writer and who she is and what she envisions as the connections of writing lives and practices. This exercise in intergenerational engagement through the genre of interview is in concert with the intergenerational gestures made by Rodríguez et. al, but presents yet another genre we encourage potential contributors to endeavor.

In "Still Christmas," Paula Mathieu explores the lasting effects of family silences and how a childhood filled with secrets propelled her to teach writing, to inspire and empower others to voice their stories. An associate professor at Boston College, Mathieu is the author of *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition* (2005) and two essay collections on place-based writing and community publishing. Resonant with her interest in contemplative practices and pedagogies, Mathieu uses creative nonfiction to mine and share personal stories, stories that have been buried and silenced for some time. She does so with the hope of establishing human connection with others who may also be suffering the high costs of silence, that we may see our stories reflected here and take heart. "Still Christmas" is at once a heart-wrenching story of loss and longing and hopeful meditation on the power of writing to "restory" lives. It is a provocative look at the "lived experience" of one writer and striking commentary about how and why we write.

In "Publishing: A Conversation/Publishing a Conversation," Cayo Gamber, Associate Professor of Writing and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at George Washington University, offers a poignant depiction of the embodied experience of writing for publication. Gamber is no stranger to that experience, having published widely on representations of the Holocaust and the role of popular culture in creating Western notions of girlhood and womanhood. Through reflections that are often hilarious, sometimes tragic, and always spot on, Gamber's contribution to this issue guides readers on the emotional journey to which publishing writers submit in perpetuity. We feel the imaginative force of anticipation, the consuming spiral of reflection, the irrational certainty of envy, the delicious sustenance of amity, the never-enoughness of perpetual, high-stakes evaluation, and the steadfastness of persisting despite the toll it all takes on bodies, minds, and souls. We can imagine sharing this essay with graduate students new to the publishing game and keeping a copy in our own top drawers to remind us that writers are not alone and to remind us that, as the mission of this journal attests, writing for publication need not be traumatizing or inhumane.

In "On *Cucuys* in Bird's Feathers: A Counterstory as Parable," Aja Y. Martinez, author of *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*, extends her groundbreaking work with counterstory, using the power of the parable to incite reflection and critical conversation about mentorship and writing/publishing. Modeling an expansive approach to genre, voice, style, and citation practice, Martinez, an assistant professor, throws into relief the power imbalances that plague discussions about these issues, inviting readers to see ourselves in the fictional characters and situations depicted in the piece. Web links, according to one reviewer, create a "realistic representation of [the] web of influences we draw from as we synthesize ideas and create relationships; that is, [they] work to challenge the mind and body dichotomy that the Dominant reinforces, embodying the reality of the relationship between thoughts and feelings we experience all the time." Martinez offers lessons for surviance in her parable, in much the same way we have traditionally taught our young through stories told around a fire and down through the generations.

Rounding out our first issue's counterstory-specific contributions is Frankie Condon's counterstory "A Bridge across Our Fears: Excerpts from the Annals of Bean." In this narrative that evokes aspects of feminist critical self-reflection and critical whiteness studies, Condon, an associate professor and author of *I Hope I Join the Band*, discusses her own subjectivity as a white woman in relation to a composite character, Bean, who exemplifies the trope of privileged white male students in our teaching contexts. Through counterstory, Condon's text contributes to the ongoing conversation on antiracism and reflective pedagogy, and we believe this work will appeal to many teachers who are interested in Neisha-Anne Green's call for accomplices (and introduce Green and her concept to new readers). This work adds to the larger conversation on what Asao Inoue (2015) identifies as "whitely ways," and as one reviewer remarked, "It calls out white women who claim to want change but who are unwilling to 'do' the hard work necessary." Condon makes clear that an antiracist agenda can lead to failure, and because of this (or in spite of this), the process is ongoing and recursive but worth the effort nonetheless.

We hope these two counterstory pieces (Condon and Martinez) are the first of many contributions that engage the methodology and method of counterstory. We intend to hold space in this journal for explicit counterstory contributions in subsequent issues.

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At the time of this writing we are all living life within a global pandemic that fuels chaos and anxiety, but also within the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which is a socio-political moment that instills revolutionary hope. We feel privileged and grateful to be in the position to voluntarily edit a radically inclusive journal in this moment. In the pages of this journal, readers will find pleasure, opportunities to delight in humor, and a "turning to art to organize the chaos" (Boquet & Eodice, 2019), an experience that brings us closer to each other as we empathize with the narratives of relationality these authors share. Ours is a shared experience.

We are deeply grateful to the collective of individuals and institutional entities who have supported the launch of this journal. Our host, the Office of Open Initiatives & Scholarly Communication of OU Libraries, has offered wonderful digital hospitality. We are especially grateful to our reviewers, who have voluntarily invested physical, intellectual, and emotional energy in the writing and the writers included here. Reviewers wholeheartedly embraced our

vision for this journal, which features a review process committed to respecting the labor of authors and reviewers. Reviewers submitted detailed feedback that acknowledged the dignity and humanity of authors and worked in good faith to help authors realize their goals for their writing. Both authors and reviewers have expressed how meaningful it was for them to participate in this process. One author lovingly shared thank-you notes and homemade biscotti that we passed along to reviewers as a token of gratitude, remarking on the novelty of a review process that is both critical and compassionate, rigorous and invigorating.

In closing, we thank readers for spending time with *Writers: Craft & Context* and warmly invite writers to submit work that is creative and experimental and that pushes genre into places you didn't think you could go with your writing.

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Thank you - Reviewers V1
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OU Writing Center

Love Letter to Kynard

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

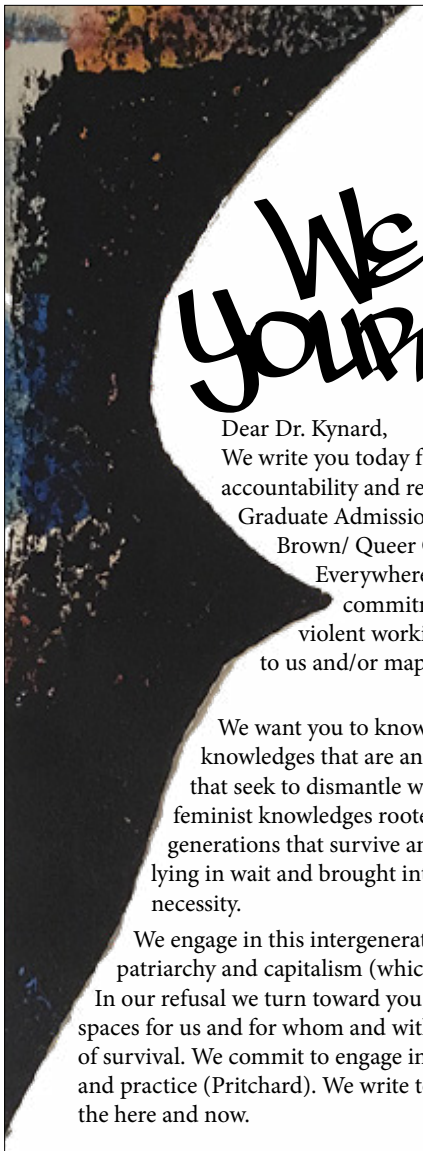
Benesemon Simmons is a doctoral candidate in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program at Syracuse University.

Vani Kannan is a 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 Townson 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*.



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

Benesemon Simmons | Doctoral candidate in Composition and Cultural Rhetoric | *Syracuse University*

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.

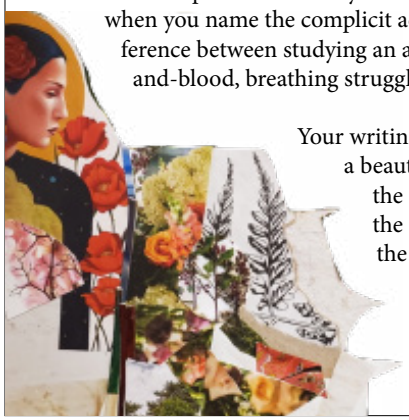
What I remember most about this first encounter with you was that as you shared the racist bullshit you and your students had been dealing with, it was clear that you were speaking with your students – deeply *with*, not *for* or *about*.

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 emobody: 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 comunities 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 v i s i o n s, *l e n g u a j e s,* a n d l i n e a g e s.

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 María 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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Daughter of India | rockstar, revisited | We Left Texas on Cinco de Mayo

Silke Feltz

Silke Feltz is an assistant teaching professor in the first-year composition program at the University of Oklahoma. Some of Silke's poems have been published in *Drunk Monkeys*, *Peeking Cat Poetry*, *Drift*, and *Child Owlet Literary Magazine*. She earned her PhD in Rhetoric, Theory & Culture at Michigan Technological University and her research focuses on the rhetoric of veganism and educational interventions of veganism. In her spare time, Silke manages *StreetKnits*, a humanitarian knitting charity that donates handmade projects to the homeless in Oklahoma.

Keywords
creative writing, poems about space and time, culture

Daughter of India

Bombay, December 2012

Sweet crow, my lonely friend,

drawing secretive lines into

a torn-up sky and guarding this cricket

field swollen with grapes of men.

Puzzled eyes— cricket games disturbed.

Tension lies between me and them.

Elephant or tiger, what will you be?

Lap One

Three men, playing barefoot on burnt soil.

Jobless, always womanless outside. I'm

dodging by speed walkers in dusty,

brown sandals, sweating out muffled lunch

break steam. A pack of kids, wild spirits,

playing with a makeshift ball as if there

was no tomorrow and tomorrow really might not—

Only my running shoes touch their ground as

we all stare. We wonder. We silently judge.

Lap Two

A couple of women appear in intricate silk saris.

Relief when they offer a smile—warmth.

My raised hand greets their kindness.

The barefoot men focus on the

game again. More relief. Beads of sweat on

my forehead, my crow has left. Reaching a corner

as the kids' ball almost hits my head.

Did they intentionally aim it at me?

Lap Three or Four

Racing heart, steady and fast. People

don't matter anymore.

Sandals.

Saris.

Stares.

In my world. Angry German

punk rock yelling in my ears until I get hit

on the shoulder by the makeshift ball.

I catch it and life stops abruptly. Silence on the field.

Tiger or elephant?

The ball sleeps in my confused palm until I throw it

back. Now, the bundle of middle

school boys starts to giggle uncontrollably.

Friends, not foes.

My fingers form the peace sign. Ear-to-ear smiles.

Lap Five

Two men appear. Surprise. Great

gear, strong legs. Fellow runners.

They come closer, heart beats faster and I

run harder because now we're in a race,

an unapologetic race between them and me,

a race that really started in my head

two rambunctious weeks ago on a bus in Delhi.

What will we be, elephant or tiger?

rockstar, revisited

so we're standing here just like seventeen years ago
at three a.m. in my parents' courtyard we consider to part
I can taste the wind on your nose— this is our final show

as my boots shuffle impatiently through virginal snow
I know what's on your beating mind— a new start
while we're standing here just like seventeen years ago

your lips sound familiar but the scent of your bass pillow
plays nightclub images that will always keep us apart
I can taste the wind on your nose— this is our final show

midnight picnics baby love and coincidental sorrow
brought out the best and the worst in each other's art
we're standing here just like seventeen years ago

and I dance into your song twirling around your shadow
while you whisper how mature I am how sensual and smart
I can taste the wind on your nose— this is our final show

you will always be my favorite stumble my famous typo
in song lyrics that remind me of my young and clumsy heart
so we're standing here just like seventeen years ago
and I can taste the wind on your nose— this is our final show.

We Left Texas on Cinco de Mayo

We left Texas on Cinco de Mayo, my death dolls neatly packed away

like fading 6th Street memories of mild Novembers past.

Numb mouth. My dentist's Texas twang still ringing in my ears,

reassuring me that life in the fierce Northwoods would be fine.

A year earlier, my love swiftly swam out of our life.

Every man has a price. A new job winked, so he left his wife.

I stayed him, but he came back and packed me up,

like another moving box, and we left Texas for good

on that steamy Monday when the sun relentlessly

floated in her blinding peak. We didn't share one

last taco or meaningful words because nothing

remained ashore. Ambition washed away our core.

The dog was drowsy from surgery that morning.

Wobbly on our feet and with swollen tongues, we entered

Oklahoma's bleeding earth. My friend's husband

slept with a stripper 'round here right before

her breast cancer said hello. The stripper

swiftly moved into their house;

a tight ass on your couch during chemo.

We left Texas on Cinco de Mayo, my death dolls neatly packed away

so they wouldn't break as well. I imagined their cackling faces when

we passed peaceful cattle in between burnt pastures in Kansas;

witnessing the cows' last station on our way to a new one.

In Iowa, we stopped because of the bridges of

Madison County. He said he really wanted to

show me what they looked like, but he didn't

even leave the car. Solemn steps took me

towards a bridge that crookedly stood still.

Strong, sullen wood kept it complete.

I took a picture and smiled.

We left Texas on Cinco de Mayo and arrived twenty-five hours

and one-thousand-six-hundred-and-two miles later.

A peninsula I didn't even know existed.

A place so small you easily miss it on the map.

The numbness had left my tongue, but I said nothing.

Only our dog, who saw snow for the first time,

jumped into winter's stubborn patch of white

with her brave, foolish heart.

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

Lida Colón

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.

Keywords
Interview, writer identity, embodiment, black writers, composition

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.

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).[1] 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.

1 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 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 cakin' 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 discoursal 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,[2] 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

2 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.

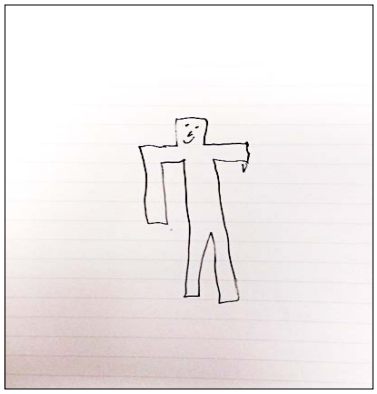

Figure 1. Paper doll outline.

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?

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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 a 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 a 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 Sates 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, Malcom 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.

Still Christmas

Paula Mathieu

Paula Mathieu is a writer and teacher. She works at Boston College where she is associate professor of English and director of first-year writing. She teaches writing as social action, first-year writing, creative nonfiction writing, mindful storytelling, composition pedagogy, and rhetoric as cultural study. She wrote *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition* and co-edited three essay collections, including *Circulating Communities: The Tactics and Strategies of Community Publishing* (with Tiffany Rousculp and Steve Parks). With Diana George, she writes about the rhetorical powers of dissident press. She also writes about intersections between writing and contemplative practice.

Abstract
"Still Christmas" is a work of creative nonfiction, where the writer explores a legacy that she shares with her mother—one of secret loss and shame—while seeking to use writing as a tool to break the pattern of silence.

Keywords
motherhood, trauma, breaking a story, SIDS, miscarriage, storytelling, restorying

In kindergarten, my classmates filled my head with stories of Christmas Eve, Santa, reindeer, and waking up early Christmas morning to tear open gifts. I anticipated the holiday with explosive excitement.

By Chritmas Eve, my family's house in suburban Chicago looked ready, its Christmas tree decorated with colored lights and ornaments. But the day came and went like any other. My parents and some of my seven older siblings sat together in our darkened family room, waiting to attend midnight Mass, watching *It's a Wonderful Life*. Perhaps the movie's message of a man overwhelmed by too many kids and business pressures who learns his life is indeed wonderful resonated with my parents. Or maybe they watched it because it aired annually on PBS. I dozed on the couch, waiting in vain for Christmas to begin.

By 5 a.m. Christmas morning, I crept from the bedroom I shared with two sisters and raced downstairs to find no gifts waiting under the tree. No one was awake. A neatly tacked white sheet sealed the entrance to our living room so tightly I couldn't peak inside.

By 7 a.m., my parents were up, sleepy in their robes and slippers, brewing coffee. I was confused that my parents seemed neither excited nor happy. Had I gotten the day wrong? It took all my nerve, but I whispered to my mother, "When's Christmas?"

She took a slow breath and replied, "Once all your siblings," whose ages at the time ranged from early 20s to preteen, "are awake and have eaten breakfast, then we take down the sheet." Any gifts were in the living room, with that sheet blocking any view into the room. I considered donning my snow boots and marching outside to peak through the window but thought better of it. The rules seemed so unfair. But I didn't know the actual, unspoken rule: Christmas couldn't begin until all the kids were proven alive.

The scene looked festive—a decorated Christmas tree and a dining table set with my grandmother's china—but the mood was somber. My mother seemed especially tense. Small things—when she did not get the turkey into the oven on time and when I spilled milky cereal on the kitchen counter—caused her temper to boil. She slammed the oven door and growled to no one in particular, "Why aren't my dishcloths where they are supposed to be?" I felt guilty as I raced to wipe up the milk because I believed my clumsiness was the source of her mood. Her anger passed quickly, replaced by awkward silence. I tiptoed around, trying not to further upset the morning of waiting.

Around midday, once my siblings had dragged themselves through breakfast, my father took down the sheet, and we filed into the room containing wrapped presents. There was no mad dash or tearing. At my mother's request, we opened gifts one at a time. My siblings gave short responses like "Gee thanks." My first box held a burgundy winter hat. I so longed for the joy of Christmas, I forced a squeal of delight and insisted on wearing that hat all day. I knew it would be a good 30 minutes before I would open another gift, but I didn't object because I didn't want to sour my mother's delicate mood.

Rather than wrapped gifts or dinner on china plates, I wanted to sit in my parents' laps. I wanted laughter. I wanted to understand why the mood in our house felt so heavy. I wanted real conversation. I didn't know it, but I wanted the story of my oldest sister.

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I discovered that I was the youngest of nine children, not eight, at my father's funeral, on a humid August afternoon when I was 15 years old. My father had died suddenly and unexpectedly a week earlier, a heart attack in Amsterdam's airport, while on a long-planned trip to Europe with my mother. Instead of starting the first week of my junior year of high school, I rode silently in a limousine with my siblings and my mother, who had barely said a word since returning home alone from Amsterdam. When the funeral procession arrived at Chicago's Holy Sepulcher Cemetery, I followed those ahead of me, watching my step as my uncomfortable heels sank into the soft grass. When I looked up, I saw for the first time a large family headstone bearing my last name. As pallbearers placed my father's casket on a scaffold that would lower it into the ground, I began reading the inscriptions indicating the births and deaths of my grandparents, uncle, and aunt.

Below those names, I encountered the short, and until now, only written version of my oldest sister's life story: Marcia Mathieu: Nov 15, 1954 to Dec 24, 1954.

Keeping myself upright in the August heat at my father's graveside while just a teenager took all my strength and will, so figuring out who Marcia was and what she meant to me would be work for another day.

I never mustered the courage to ask my mother about my oldest sister who died on a Christmas Eve ages before I was born. I couldn't imagine asking a grief-stricken 53-year-old widow with eight children to talk about a loss she had kept secret for three decades. Even if I had found the courage, I wouldn't have known how to broach this issue with her. Whenever I talked with my mother about anything, like spending the night at a friend's house, I paced nervously before asking, rehearsing with knots in my stomach. "Mom, can I spend the night at Amy's house tomorrow night?" The answer was usually yes, so it wasn't conflict I feared, just the encounter itself. Why I felt so nervous was never clear to me, so I attributed it to my own awkwardness. If the issue was in any way significant, I lost my nerve before words were ever uttered. That tension explains why Amy's mother, not my own, bought me my first training bra, why I learned about menstruation from a Judy Blume book, and why my mother and I never talked about my father after his sudden death.

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I suspect the lack of stories and meaningful words in my home indirectly propelled me to become a teacher of writing, someone who encourages others to share their words and stories with the world. But until now, I have shared precious few of my own stories and have not explored in writing why and how I was shaped by a household filled with silences and unspoken pain.

Any story I write about my family will always remain flawed, limited to my perspective, clouded by memory. I am doomed to get it wrong. What's more, the act of writing about this topic feels like a transgression, the breaking of a fundamental but unstated family rule: keep our painful stories silent.

Silence, however, has exacted a high cost, for me at least and I suspect for my mother and others as well. In trying to let some untold parts of my family's story escape onto this page, I hope to break a silence brought on by shame and fear and not to perpetuate that shame in my own family. Perhaps someone reading might recognize something about their own family, their experiences, or their unspoken rules. Perhaps they will find a part of themselves in these stories and feel less alone.[1]

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In December 1954, snow blanketed the Chicago area, which was a welcomed relief from a summer that had brought record heat. My

1 This line invokes and acknowledges the fine work of Amy Robillard, especially her book *We Find Ourselves in Other People's Stories: On Narrative Collapse and a Lifetime Search for Story* (New York: Routledge, 2018). Robillard's essayistic blending of sometimes-traumatic stories from her life with her research about writing is beautiful, incisive, and has paved the way for me to imagine publishing a story like this for an audience of writers and writing instructors.

oldest brothers were preschoolers, anticipating a white Christmas with my parents and their baby sister, Marcia, who had just turned a month old. Our tidy brick house in Harvey, Illinois, was filled with smells of baking apple pie and a live Christmas tree. Wrapped Christmas gifts hid out of sight.

I don't know who found Marcia's lifeless body in her crib on Christmas Eve. Did one of my brothers, excitedly, try to wake his baby sister? Did my father come home from work early to nuzzle his baby girl? Or, most likely, was my mom so busy with both boys and Christmas preparations that when her baby girl didn't cry, didn't distract her *just this once*, she enjoyed, relished even, a sweet stretch of time pulled in one fewer direction? Did she wait long past the time Marcia should have awakened before she checked on her? Would those stolen, relished moments forever remain my mother's deepest regret?

I don't know. This Christmas unfolded a decade and a half before I was born, and my brothers remember little from that time. They were practically babies themselves. The oldest, only four at the time, recalls confusion, firemen running in the house: "Why were there firemen when there was no fire?"

He shared this information with me a few years ago when I mustered the courage to email him to ask him about our sister for the first time. He replied within hours. "Mom was terribly upset," he wrote. "I was telling her not to cry, but I didn't know what was going on."

Other than exchanging emails, I have never talked with any of my siblings about my oldest sister. In my house growing up, Marcia's name or any fact of her brief life was never mentioned or even alluded to.

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I have a daughter. In the sleep-deprived haze that comprised the first months of her life, I alternated between two fears: of her not sleeping, which was most of the time; and of her not waking when she managed to fall asleep. A baby is so fragile, so tangentially part of this world, as much spirit as physical presence that each breath feels like a miracle. How can one keep expecting miracle after miracle?

As a new mother, I feared Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, a much-debated but sobering reality that some otherwise healthy babies die unexpectedly without clear reason. We now know the risk is greater in the winter, when babies are fewer than four months old, when blankets are in the crib, and when babies don't sleep on their backs.

In 1954, my mother, just 25 years old, knew none of these things. No one did. Doctors then told the story that sudden, unexpected deaths of babies, like my sister, were accidental suffocations: sad but tragic parental mistakes. I picture my mother sitting alone, a cigarette in her trembling hand, while everyone moved quickly around her, doing what needed to be done. They didn't blame her, at least not directly, but everyone knew who should have protected her infant daughter. My mother, most of all, would have known.

The firemen would have tried in vain to revive the baby. The police would have been called to rule out criminal behavior. The officer would have been sympathetic but businesslike, kicking snow off his boots, talking in hushed tones with my father, who would have rushed the two miles home from his auto dealership after my mother's frantic call.

Practical things would have happened. An ambulance would have taken Marcia's body away. Much would have been removed from the house: wrapped Christmas presents. Baby girl clothes. Anything pink. The crib itself.

The subsequent six babies—who would be the last thing on anyone's mind that day—would sleep elsewhere. No one should sleep in a dead baby's crib. My father would remove anything that reminded my mother of Marcia.

He would even remove the family itself, whisking them to Florida for an impromptu trip, hoping to fly away from reminders of Christmas and the sympathetic-but-accusing stares of neighbors. My mother would have landed hundreds of miles away from her baby's tiny body, in a place that must have felt too sunny, too humid, too out of synch with her grief. In paradise, she still had two young boys to tend. Boys old enough to ask painful questions— "Where is Marcia? Where is baby?"—but not old enough to understand the pain such words could cause.

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Almost exactly a year after Marcia's birth, my mother delivered another baby girl, my oldest living sister, who turned a month old on Christmas day, one day after the anniversary of Marcia's death. How many hours must my mother have watched this baby's tiny belly rising and falling as she slept? How old did she have to turn before my mother could tell herself this one would live?

And just when my sister turned a year old, my mother had yet another newborn, another son. Over the next dozen years, my mother gave birth to and raised four more babies, including me, the youngest. She provided for us, cared for us, but she rarely engaged us physically by holding us, or emotionally through meaningful conversation.

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My mother rebuffed any attempt to discuss Marcia. My oldest brother's email reported that he tried to talk with our mother about their shared loss months or years later, he's not sure anymore. She flatly refused, even though he shared the trauma with her as well as memories of his sister.

When my oldest sister was a teenager, she watched *Marcus Welby, MD* on TV with my parents, and the plot involved an infant's sudden death. During the show, my mother began to cry and quietly raced upstairs.

"What was that about?," my sister asked my father. He took off his glasses, turned off the television, and addressed my sister: "Before you were born, we had a baby girl who died." My dad spoke in a matter-of-fact but grave tone. His willingness to talk suggests that perhaps his silence was in deference to my mother.

After she talked with my father, my sister went to my mother, alone in her bedroom. My sister knocked and carefully stepped in. "Would you like to talk about it, Mom?," she offered gently. As she moved to sit on the bed, she added, "Dad told me what happened, why you're upset. Can we talk?"

My mother's face was turned away, and she didn't turn around. "No," she said to the wall.

"It might make you feel better to talk about it," my sister said quietly, trying not to give up too easily.

"No." My mother's answer was final. My sister waited for something more, but it never came. She perched awkwardly on the bed, staring at her mother's back, rubbing it gently. She eventually left the room.

When I was in my early twenties, one of my brothers named his first daughter after Marcia, maybe as an effort to honor the sister he never knew. He spelled the name differently because even the spelling of our secret sister's name was uncertain to us. The Chicago cemetery was the only place to clarify the spelling, and my brother was living in California.

After my niece's birth until my mother's death two years later, my mother never spoke her granddaughter's name. She simply called her "the baby," even though by then my mother had five other grandchildren. When she said "baby," we all knew whom she meant. Even a slightly wrong version of Marcia's name held the power to tear the lid off my mother's tightly sealed pain.

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To love and be loved by my mother was to be present together, often wordlessly. I spent hours observing her, taking her in. She was petite and classically beautiful. Despite bearing nine children, she returned to her 5-feet-tall, 110-pound frame within months of each birth. She dressed with classic, understated style. No detail was overlooked. She wore her hair blonde in a short bob, which she had washed and set weekly at the hairdresser. Her nails were always polished. Although she could tan easily, she took great care of her skin, wearing a broad hat while sunning. Each night she rolled her hair into pin curls, securing each one with bobby pins, used various creams to remove her makeup and cleanse her skin, and meticulously cleaned her teeth. Every action was deliberate.

As she readied herself for a new day, she perched at her dressing table before a large makeup mirror, wearing a taupe dressing robe and wedge-heeled slippers. I often sat on the floor watching her as she added foundation, powder, eye makeup, and lipstick, took down her hair, and then, finally, dressed. I debated with myself about which way she looked prettier: in her pin curls with no makeup and robe, or dressed, fully made up, with hair curled under the chin. I preferred her unadorned look because we saw so little else of her private side.

While I spent hours watching my mother, I did not imitate her. I was athletic and wore by brothers' hand-me-downs, as did my sisters, much to my mother's disappointment. For Catholic school, we wore plaid uniform kilts, white blouses, red cardigans, and knee socks, so wearing a dress during off hours felt like torture. I climbed trees and played softball. My sisters and I also shared our father's stockier build, so I was both taller and heavier than my mother by seventh grade. When I noticed this aloud one day, my mother remarked matter-of-factly, "You have Mathieu legs," meaning thick and white like my father's, not tan and birdlike like hers. My cheeks flushed hot as my body felt impossibly big.

Sometimes I wore a dress to please my mother or let her blow-dry my long hair, but I never managed to stay kempt. I was (and still am) clumsy and scatterbrained, so my dress bows never stayed tied, I often lost track of one sock, and my hair easily misbehaved and tangled. I returned home from school each day healthy but disheveled. My mother called me a *ragamuffin*, a term that stung, especially when I tried to look feminine. I longed for her approval, but aspiring to be like her never seemed an option.

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From spending time at friends' houses, I knew that my family was different, that we talked less than others, that my mother was reserved. I loved my friends' moms who peppered me with questions, and I enthusiastically answered them all. At school, I raised my hand to answer questions perhaps too often. Writing and my imagination became a safe place for me, a space to venture ideas without too much risk, to offer words without fearing a response. To avoid hazarding too much conversation, I sometimes I wrote notes to soothe squabbles with my sisters.

To explain my family to myself, my inner voice cooked up stories that tended to be highly critical of me and my actions. Our brains are powerful and compulsive tellers of stories and will try to create coherent stories, even without enough information.[2] Had I been born with a different constitution or brain chemistry, I might have spun heroic tales about a curious mind trapped in a land with no

2 Here I draw from Jonathan Gotschall's *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2012).

words, a mind on an adventure to escape to a mythical kingdom where words run free.

My voice, however, was trained by a middle-class white sensibility where one never named even obvious racial contradictions (like the local clubs that barred Jews and blacks), by Catholic schooling that taught obedience above all else, and by an introverted shyness that caused constant self-questioning. I tried desperately to be the good girl, the one who could fix our broken family by behaving better than anyone ever had, who believed diligence, good grades, and cheerfulness could heal the vague unnamed pain that pervaded our house. And when that didn't work, because of course that didn't work, I felt not good enough. If I had only been a bit smarter, a bit more godly, and a bit less, well, me, the fairytale happy ending would have come.

Sometimes an illusion of control carries a heavy cost. At least in my story, I was the feeble hero, and the world was of my making. But that meant I had failed in my quest to restore my family to happiness and to words.

Now, by writing about the silences in my family, which were fueled by trauma and shame, I aim to tell a version of my family's story with a hope that writing it can change something or someone, especially me. At the same time I fear this desire might be a re-enactment of the same hero complex I held as a child: if only I can find the right image, the most beautiful words, I can craft the story that will heal my family. I become filled with the same fear that I (and my writing) are just not up to the task.

Hoping for catharsis, I lament: if only I could write this story correctly.

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When my husband and I learned I was pregnant, I was happy and scared and thrilled. It wasn't unexpected. I told myself we were no longer trying to prevent pregnancy and would see what happened. I filled my mind with positive thoughts and my body with lots of water and healthy food. Once I saw the plus symbol on a home pregnancy test, I visited my doctor. We kept the news under wraps because it was early, but I got plenty of rest, documented the growth of our little bean, and didn't think about caffeine or alcohol. Weeks passed.

When I was days shy of 12 weeks pregnant, which is usually believed to be the safe time to announce a pregnancy, I stopped in the bathroom after teaching my once-weekly creative nonfiction workshop before commuting home from the university. Blood. Not a lot, but enough to cause concern. I called my doctor, who said to rest and come to the office first thing the next morning. At night I started cramping and feared the worst. At the doctor's office, the microphone couldn't find the baby's heartbeat.

"Before we come to any conclusions, I want to send you to the ultrasound lab. Sometimes bleeding is normal, and the baby might be positioned so we can't hear the heart.

Let's assume the best for now." I appreciated my doctor's reassurance, even though it felt hollow.

By noon, the possibility of the best was ruled out. "I can detect no signs of life," the lab technician said quietly, "I'm sorry." I was told to check into the hospital because being three months along, I would need a procedure to help the no-longer-living baby find a way out. I reported to the labor and delivery unit, painfully aware of the irony.

By the time I was admitted and gowned, the cramping was intense. I was crying for my baby who wouldn't be and for the shame I already carried, sensing I had done something to cause this miscarriage. I asked to go to the bathroom before they administered anesthesia, where my body passed impossible amounts of blood. The nurse grabbed me before I teetered to the floor. Soon I was asleep.

When I awoke the nurse was holding my hand. "You're fine, physically. This is an awful day, but I'll see you back here for a happier day sometime soon. I promise."

Those were kind and soothing words. But the fact was, she couldn't promise. She didn't know. My doctor said one miscarriage was "clinically insignificant," so I should wait a few months, and if it happened again, we'd do some tests.

The next day, a Friday, as I was home recovering from the procedure, my husband handed me the phone, saying it was from work.

"Congratulations, Paula," I heard. I winced, as the words hit hard.

The voice belonged to the dean of Arts and Sciences informing me that I had been granted tenure and promoted to the rank of associate professor in the department of English. This milestone was the culmination of 15 years of postundergraduate work, three book projects, a dozen articles, six graduate and undergraduate syllabi, 11 semesters of teaching, hundreds of students taught, thousands of papers graded, millions of words of student writing read, and six months of waiting after handing in my tenure dossier.

This call should have filled me with joy and relief, but I could barely listen as I reeled from the dean's congratulatory wishes. I failed to sound pleased or grateful. I managed not to cry until we hung up, but the poor man must have wondered why I sounded like the least happy tenure recipient ever.

Back at work after the weekend, many colleagues popped their heads in my office door, sent a note, or emailed warm, well-intentioned celebratory words, to which I smiled and gritted my teeth. I wanted to feel happy. I should have been celebrating. But every

"Congratulations" invoked my baby who would never be.

Almost no one knew about my loss. I hadn't meant to keep anything a secret; we were just following the normal "keep it quiet until after the first trimester" logic. But somehow, announcing a miscarriage when no one knew I had been pregnant when I was supposed to be celebrating a professional milestone seemed a bit too incongruous.

As much as I considered myself so different than my mother, I found myself like her: mourning a secret loss, expecting everyone around me to magically sense my grief and care for me, feeling angry when unsuspecting friends and colleagues turned out not to be mind readers.

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Half a year later, I was pregnant again, but nothing felt the same. Even the plus sign on the pregnancy test was faded, like it wasn't sure it was true. With every bathroom trip, I expected to see blood. Every doctor's visit, I awaited bad news. I had neither the positivity nor the will to eat healthy foods and hydrate. I suffered debilitating headaches, and my doctor advised me to drink a cup of coffee a day. I did and loved it, withstanding questions and disapproving looks from servers and passersby. I was doing everything wrong with this pregnancy, but likely it wouldn't matter anyway.

Except that it did. Despite my ambivalence and fear, eight days before her due date, my daughter arrived, a little on the small side but a healthy, dark-haired spitfire.

Perhaps like my mother, I beheld the creature I most wanted with love and terror. I hadn't been the model expectant mother. Had I harmed her? Why hadn't I eaten more leafy green vegetables? Was my milk supply limited because I hadn't hydrated enough? I quickly learned that parenting opens new paths for unbridled self-criticism because every decision is made while exhausted and uncertain.

Less than 48 hours after my daughter's birth, I sat in a wheelchair, a nurse handed me an infant, and my husband wheeled me out of the hospital. As the security doors of the maternity ward opened to the rest of the hospital, I looked down on this tiny, fierce, and breathtakingly beautiful creature as my pulse raced through my stomach and limbs. Despite being a grown-up, a tenured college professor, and a wife, I had no idea how to be a mother. And both my husband and I were without our mothers to guide us.

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My daughter was healthy, according to the doctors, but she cried more loudly and more intensely than any other infant I had ever encountered. She cried hours straight each night. And the two things infants were supposed to do reliably—eat and sleep—happened fitfully and infrequently.

Why did she cry so much? Lactation consultants offered advice on how to help my daughter latch, how I could make more milk, how to eliminate dairy, soy, wheat, and sugar from my diet in case her fussiness was due to allergies, how to pump when she wasn't nursing adequately, how to apply salve to my bleeding and sore nipples, how to supplement with formula. Around the clock, I spent hours hooked up to a ridiculous pumping machine extracting milk from my tender breasts, then pacing or bouncing on a large exercise ball to coax my daughter to drink the milk from a bottle.

I cried every single day. I rarely slept two hours in a row. One night, I wondered if my daughter might be possessed. If I hadn't had the luck of being on sabbatical that semester, I am sure I would have lost my job.

During one week of crying, Penny, our mixed-breed dog, curled tightly into her bed and put both paws over her ears to try to quiet the intense noise. A photo of Penny in that pose brings back all the sleep-deprived intensity of 2008.

When my daughter wasn't crying, or when she slept in my arms or on my chest, my heart ached at how beautiful she was. Her dark hair was thick and stood up everywhere. Her intense brown eyes took in everything.

I joined a new-moms group, which forced me to venture out of the house and start to explore life with a baby. As a group, we cried and shared fears, but I noticed that the other babies slept through our meetings, calmly in their moms' laps like warm potatoes or nursing without a peep, while my baby wriggled or cried or needed to be bounced. The other moms ate lunch together after our weekly meeting, while I raced home to pump. I shared with my new friends some of my challenges—they were obvious—but I didn't let on how hopeless and afraid I was.

My fear, and the stories I told myself about this fear, created deep shame: that I was failing as a mother, that I couldn't soothe my daughter. The more ashamed I felt, the more I hid these feelings from friends and family.

When my daughter turned a month old, a nurse from my insurance plan phoned. "How are your daughter and you doing?" she asked.

I burst into tears. To my own surprise, out spilled my story of how little she slept, how hard she cried, how she rarely stayed still. This nurse, whom I had never met, replied with remarkably calming words. "Sometimes, children who are passionate, full of life, and curious are not the happiest of infants," she told me. "The qualities making your life difficult right now will be the very things you love in your daughter as she gets older." She sounded so sure of herself.

"I know you're just saying that to make me feel better," I practically whispered into the phone, "but it's working. Do you really believe what you're saying?" I knew she had never laid eyes on my child.

"Yes," she said. "I do."

I clung to those words through the subsequent months as our daughter wailed her way through several dietary changes, an acid-reflux diagnosis, medicines, prescription formula, multiple ear infections, diarrhea and dehydration due antibiotics, overnight hospitalization at 10 months due to dehydration, and a first birthday in surgery getting ear tubes.

Our longest night was spent at Children's Hospital in Boston, watching as a group of five medical technicians took 30 minutes to insert an IV into our 10-month-old, poking, failing, poking again as she wailed and wailed. We stood helplessly as our baby looked pleadingly into our eyes and screamed.

Once the IV was finally inserted into her ankle and taped so she couldn't pull it out, we spent many hours alone behind our curtain in a shared room. I climbed into the crib to soothe our baby as she got needed fluids. We saw no doctors or nurses, although we overheard questions asked of the mother in the other curtained bed in our room: "Does your son have vision in either eye? When was his trachea tube inserted most recently?"

Our irritation of not being checked on melted into the humbling realization that our daughter was probably the least sick patient in the hospital. As scary as the night was, the doctors assured us our girl would soon outgrow her challenges.

***

My baby lived. She grew into the furiously happy toddler and adventurous child the nurse had promised. My sister, Marcia, lived 39 days and died, without warning.

Before I became a mother, 39 days seemed like a short time, a blink of an eye. I now appreciate how much mothering would have been poured into Marcia's 39 days. Eating once every three hours, Marcia would have been fed 312 bottles, almost exclusively by my mother, accounting for about 156 hours spent holding, feeding, and gazing at this tiny creature. My mother didn't nurse, like most US white middle-class women in the 1950s, and all those bottles would have been washed by hand, as dishwashers were found in only 4% of US homes during the 1950s. A newborn soils six to 10 diapers per day, which means my mother changed Marcia's cloth diaper fastened with safety pins somewhere between two and four hundred times. And of course, Marcia's diapers would have been in addition to the hundreds of diapers my mother would have changed during that same time for my two-year-old brother.

I know how exhausted I was when my daughter was 39 days old. It was just shy of the Fourth of July holiday, and we were invited to a party. Part of me dreaded the idea of showering, dressing, pumping extra milk, and packing nearly a suitcase to leave the house. Another part of me rallied, excited to share my beautiful baby with others. Motherhood taught me that exasperation and fear reside simultaneously with exorbitant feelings of love and joy. I hated that I wasn't sleeping and that my baby rarely stopped crying, but I wanted nothing more than to hold her, stare into her face, and breathe her in.

Knowing what I do now, I can't fathom the horror of walking into my baby's room and finding her not breathing, not revivable. After so many moments but not nearly enough. Did time stand still for my mother? Or was it a blur? Was she able to call who needed to be called and function long enough for others to arrive? She must have, as my brothers would have been too young, and it was long before 911 existed. How did she keep living in that moment and every subsequent moment?

***

When Marcia died in 1954, the medical community ruled her death an accidental suffocation.[3] Even though a handful of pathologists were noticing babies who died suddenly without signs of suffocation and began publishing articles as early as 1947, it wouldn't be until 1962 that parents who had lost babies started coming together, supporting each other, and questioning the medical findings to assert, in ways my mother never could, that they hadn't suffocated their babies.

Parents named Jed and Louise Row, Fred and Mary Dore, and Sylvia and Saul Goldberg were some of the first to insist sudden infant deaths should be researched. They founded parent-support groups, lobbied the NIH and Congress, and helped start pathology-research projects. A decade of mounting organization and pressure by parents convinced Congress to pass the Sudden Infant Death Syndrome Act of 1974, which allowed SIDS to be recognized, named, and funded for research.

I wonder if my mother ever caught mention of this legislation in newspapers in 1974. Probably not. I doubt debates at the NEH or medical legislation garnered front-page news. Even if she did, my mother likely always believed that Marcia's death was her fault.

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Becoming a mother of one helped me glipse the courage it took my mother to parent after such a devastating loss. She showed up for her family, even if she white-knuckled her way through it. For my mother, and maybe to some extent all mothers, the vein of love cannot be disentangled from the fear of loss. Maybe I didn't get the closeness or conversation I wanted or even needed from my mother. But maybe, I'm coming to believe, her silence was not a choice but rather something imposed by the shame she carried.

3 To learn about the history of SIDS, I consulted Michael P. Johnson and Karl Hufbauer's "Sudden Infant Death Syndrome as a Medical Research Problem since 1945" (*Social Problems*, Oct. 1982, Vol. 30, No. 1, Thematic Issue on Health and Illness, pp. 65-81).

My mother loved in small, tacit ways. When I was small, she rubbed her nose to mine as she tucked me in to say good night. She bathed and shampooed me every Sunday night, carefully combing through and drying my long hair before I paraded through our living room, clean and pajamaed for my father and siblings, who would briefly look up from the television to notice me.

When I was seven, my mother held me in her lap after Patches, the stray dog my sister brought home from college, took a bite out of my cheek, requiring nine stitches to close the gash. While that should be a scary memory, I remember it fondly because I had the rare good fortune to sit for an extended time in my mother's lap as she pressed a cloth to my face while she and my father calmly discussed the wound and who should take me to the doctor. That hour of physical closeness remains so vivid to me I have neither memory of the pain nor fear of dogs.

When as an adult I rented my first apartment, my mother mailed me a greeting card with a picture of happy blonde child on the cover. She wrote these words inside: "This picture reminds me of you as a little girl. Love, Mom."

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If my mother had been alive when I became a mother, I wonder if a previously unbroachable path of conversation might have opened up for us, a way for us to dip into issues that forever remained unspoken.

I like to imagine my mother flying to Massachusetts for my daughter's first Christmas, when our small house was crammed with baby necessities but lacked even a single Christmas decoration. I was frantic and tearful from sleep deprivation and anxiety. I imagine my mother helping me bathe and change my baby with a skill only 18 years of parenting newborns could bring. She would have seemed contained, collected, as she did in most moments of her life. She might have said, "All babies get fussy, nothing to be worried about." And maybe she would have meant it. Or maybe she would have been silently anxious. The truth is, I can't imagine what she would have been thinking or feeling inside.

My mother was a centripetal force, powerfully, silently swirling inward to keep her thoughts, energy, and emotions contained, while to the outside world she presented an image of grace and calm. In some ways, I became her opposite: a centrifugal force that scatters belongings, ideas, words, and emotions about me, sometimes sending them out into the world. In other ways, I internalize my mother's reserve, withholding words, fearing judgment, and suppressing my feelings.

I picture us all spending Christmas Eve together, a day that would have likely resonated painfully for her, even decades after Marcia's death. Even so, she would have managed to coax her granddaughter to sleep after much pacing and bouncing.

I imagine that in those precious few hours of stillness, I find the courage to ask my mother about her life. "Being the mother of a newborn is really tough," I would want to tell her. "How did you manage it so many times?"

I have no idea what, if anything, she might have replied or where the conversation might have wandered. I'm not sure I could have asked more questions or ever voiced Marcia's name. I don't know how much she could have opened up to me about her experiences as a mother. As many times as I have tried, my imagination cannot conjure the details of such a conversation. I can't find the words.

But writing this essay has helped reduce my fear of telling this story incorrectly because getting it right isn't what matters most. What matters is the essaying, the trying: crafting a story as carefully as I can to break the silences that preceded it and the shame that fueled it. Breaking the old story *is* the new story. I'm guided by Rebecca Solnit's words:

> Stories save your life. And stories are your life. We are our stories; stories that can be both prison and the crowbar to break open the door of that prison. We make stories to save ourselves or to trap ourselves or others—stories that lift us up or smash us against the stone wall of our own limits and fears. Liberation is always in part a storytelling process: breaking stories, breaking silences, making new stories.[4]

I write this story for Marcia, whose life was never worded into story. I write for my mother, who likely believed that, by action or inaction, she caused her first daughter to die and silently carried that shame throughout her life. I write for the little girl who believed if she had just been a better daughter, her house would have been happier and more filled with words. I write to shine light on shame, for it thrives in silence and shadow. I write for mothers who can feel like we always fail no matter what choices we make. I write for other writers and teachers of writing, in hopes my story-breaking will engender yours. I write for my students, who bravely share their stories with me, and I want to return the favor. I write for anyone who might find themselves in any of these stories. I write to restory my life, and in doing so I reach toward my mother, even if just in my imagination, to craft a connection we never managed to forge together.

Acknowledgments

This work of creative nonfiction is part of a larger project in which I explore traumas, secrets, and the myriad ways that the unspoken

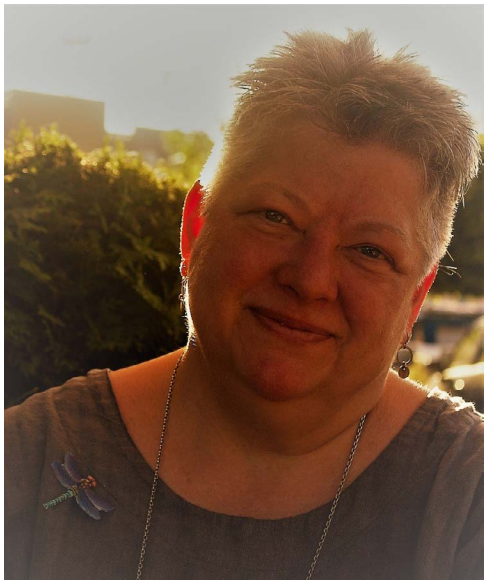
4 Solnit, Rebecca, "Silence and Powerlessness Go Hand in Hand," *The Guardian*, March 8, 2017. My essay is also informed by Solnit's "Break the Story" from *Call Them By Their True Names* (San Francisco: Haymarket, 2018). An earlier version is available online.

defined my early life, growing up the youngest of nine children in a Catholic family in suburban Chicago. Due to my family's tendency never to share private information or painful truths, writing this project has felt challenging and risky.

I'm deeply indebted to close friends who have encouraged me to keep on writing and not to listen to the voices in my head urging me to stop: Jessica Restaino, one of my first and most encouraging readers; Veronica House, for your unwavering love and support; Carrie Stead, for your level head and sharp eye; Sarah Ehrich, for conversations about writing scary things. Amy Robillard: your published words gave me permission to create mine. Thank you to Melanie Yergeau, Janel Atlas, Stephanie Kerschbaum, Jane Spickett, Bonnie Rudner, Dacia Gentilella, Kristin Imre, Martha Hincks, Brian Zimmerman, Aoife Sullivan, Stephanie Briggs, Alex Tsouvalas, and Delia Tsouvalas. My siblings, thank you, for tolerating my questions and my stories about our family, which likely differ from yours. Thank you also to Thomas Daley, in whose workshops I drafted much of this material, and to the workshop participants who read patiently and with care. To the anonymous reviewers of Writers: Craft and Context*: I am indebted to you for your encouragement and the specific suggestions that helped me make useful revisions. And to the editors of this journal: thank you deeply for your generosity and encouragement throughout this process.*

Publishing: A Conversation/ Publishing a Conversation

Cayo Gamber



Keywords
writing, academic publishing, blind peer review, journal editorship

Cayo Gamber, associate professor of writing and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the George Washington University, teaches multiple sections of a writing course entitled "Legacies of the Holocaust" as well as Introduction to WGSS. She has published widely in the area of Holocaust Studies, including analyzing the role of museums as pilgrimage sites, the use of photographs in creating "illuminated memory," how items sold in museum stores are endowed with meaning, and more. She also has published various essays about the ways cultural artifacts – such as the Barbie doll and advertisements for menstrual products – are implicated in the creation of Western notions of girlhood and womanhood.

ANTICIPATION

I love the moment when I send a piece out. It is out there—via the mail with a SASE or via the internet—and for the time it travels and I wait to hear, it is all about the possibilities. When I send out creative writing pieces to literary magazines, I imagine not only hearing that the piece has been accepted but that I also have been invited to become a feature writer, and, thus, never again will go through the peer-review process as my pieces will always already be welcome. When I send out academic pieces to various journals, I imagine my piece not only will be accepted but will be rewarded as the best "something." As a result of my prolific publications, I receive letters from fellow writers and academics telling me how much my writing means to them. My university features me in campus publications. I am offered an endowed chair, a MacArthur fellowship . . . the possibilities are endless.

DEJECTION

There have been times when I sent out a piece I was unduly proud of to a top-tier journal believing they too would love the piece only to be shot down. Really, shot down. One editor asked: "Why did you even think you could send this piece our way?" Another queried: "Are you familiar with the reputation of our publication?"

Upon being rejected, I recall being in high school, pulsing with the desire to be accepted, to be loved, waiting to be asked to the dance, never, ever being one of the first girls who would be. Upon being rejected, I respond as I usually do when hurt: I try to charm my way back in. In fact, I sent the editor, who wondered why I even sent my essay to him, a piece about the dizzying experience of having my writing refused. That night, after being shot down, I kept reliving the feeling of plummeting towards the earth, hands over my head, waiting for the terrible impact of it all. I lay in bed unable to sleep. The following morning, I forwarded him the following play I had written in my head.

Upon Being Rejected by
Fill-in-the-name-of-an-esteemed-journal-in-your-field:
A Play in Two Acts

The Characters: All the characters reside in the writer's head. They often all speak together, and quite frequently speak at cross purposes.

Scenes:

Act one: The writer's bedroom as she attempts to go to sleep.

Act two: The writer's study, at a table with her laptop (really, it is her dining room table, but she likes to imagine it is her study).

Act One

The writer is curled up on her side of the bed. The lights are off. Her partner slumbers peacefully by her side. The dog, who should never have been allowed in the bed in the first place, also slumbers peacefully, and most peacefully at this moment because all four of her paws are touching the writer and this, apparently, makes her feel more secure.

In spite of engaging in various partially learned relaxation techniques, the writer is unable to go to sleep because various voices are speaking in her head. As the minutes pass, the voices become more and more strident. The following characters' declamations begin overlapping. For example, as soon as Cassandra gets to "but not now," Fayanna begins speaking her lines. Soon the entire conversation becomes cacophonous—all voices speaking at once.

Cassandra: Now you are never going to get reappointed. If you had placed that essay in the journal, you could feel pretty comfortable, but not now. You need to get some publications out there, and how are you going to do that when it took you so long to pull this one together?

Fayanna: It would be good to remember how you feel right now and think about those feelings when you are commenting on students' papers so you can be more vigilant about saying something that will make them feel there is something promising there, even when they get a C on the paper. You don't want to leave students feeling this dejected. Think about how you can respond with greater kindness, gentleness.

Tempest: I can't believe I have been treated this way. I just can't believe it. Who does he think he is rejecting my paper? I can't believe this. What an *&&@^!#. What a &&%#** journal. %#^@#&^^.

Cassandra: So what are you going to do now? You had this lovely life, you know. And now you have gone and ruined it all. What will you do when you have to leave the university? Hmmm? Just where do you think you can go and what do you think you can do? How marketable is someone whose work is about menstrual products and Holocaust atrocity photographs, of all things. Well?

Prudence: Now, it is clear that he read the paper and he read it with care. He has given you some good advice to consider. Call your writing group and ask them to recommend some journals where you might try to place the piece so you can begin studying those journals.

Cassandra: You've really done it this time. Do you really think you can get this thing placed? You shouldn't have sent it in until it was perfect. Now you won't have anything to show for yourself. You need more publications.

Prudence: It is a promising piece and there is a place for it.

Fayanna: It was so lovely when it was out there and one could imagine it published. The fourth or fifth piece in the journal. The essay placed where the publication naturally fell open.

Cassandra: I really don't think there is enough time to turn this piece around. What are you going to do if you aren't reappointed?

Tempest: %$#*&&. You can show him. What you need to do is to find a bigger, better journal.

All Characters: A bigger, better journal? Hmmm . . . . Well . . . . Ummm . . . .

Each lost in her own tantalizing thoughts, the characters are quiet. In the lull the author falls to sleep.

Act Two

The writer at her laptop typing away. She looks up and murmurs to herself.

Writer: I wonder if they would consider a short, creative piece. A play in two acts, perhaps?

To some degree, this play protected me from my fall, but it was not the magic answer. I did not charm my way into that journal then nor have I since.

I know that in the publishing world, rejection is inevitable. I know that, but it still always feels personal, as if the journal, most decidedly, does not want to dance with me. The editors of the journals, similar to the boys when I was in high school, are in the power position and they let you know it when they reject you. "We are only able to publish a fraction of what is submitted"; "thank you for your interest in our publication"; "subscribe to our blog"; "be sure to follow us on Twitter or Facebook" are some of the solipsistic responses you receive. There also are the crueler responses: "after careful consideration by our editors, we regret to inform you that we must decline this submission on editorial grounds and subsequently have declined to send the paper out to external peer reviewers"; "our editorial board and expert reviewers determined that your paper doesn't meet our publication standards."

That said, sometimes there also are rejections coupled with a few paragraphs of explanation. Those paragraphs clarify that your piece has been read and that there may be hope for it. Often, however, what becomes clear is that if there is hope, it is that the piece will be published elsewhere.

And then there is the world of creative writing. For a time, I sent my nonfiction stories to a well-known magazine again and again. Each time I sent my piece I felt sure was perfect for the magazine, the SASE came back: no. And this is another horror when it comes to creative writing: you simply are turned down with phrases like "your piece was given careful consideration by our editors, but it does not suit our current needs"; "we hope you have success elsewhere"; "we hope you will continue to support our literary community and are willing to offer you a discounted subscription rate"; "we recommend you consult a recent issue of our journal in order to better understand what types of submissions we are seeking." If you are fortunate, you might receive the phrase "we appreciate your interest and encourage you to pitch us again." You never receive individual comments. You never are told why you aren't a fit—even if you try, again and again, with a particular publication.

On one occasion, I refused to stand by, a wallflower, pretending these rejections did not matter. I wrote to the editor of the well-known magazine to say, emphatically, that I wouldn't be sending him anything for two years. When I sent in another piece, the third year hence, that didn't deter him. I received another rejection. I mentioned my unproductive relationship with the editor of this literary magazine to my class one day and one of my students beamed at me. She said, "Oh, my mother was published in that magazine. I can't wait to tell her how many times you have been rejected. That will make her feel so good about her acceptance. I think it is lovely that people like my mother get published; she's a nurse."

And with that student's remark, I most assuredly not only fell, but I landed, my white (chubby) legs making a slight splash as I fell into the ocean while everything turned away, quite leisurely, from my disaster.[1]

ENVY

When fallen and rejected, I always turn to one of my favourite quotations about writers from Anne Lamott. Not only do I turn to her in times of need, I include this quotation on my peer-review rubric for students and thus I look at it multiple times over any given semester:

> I know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have made a great deal of money, and not one of them sits down routinely feeling wildly enthusiastic and confident. Not one of them writes elegant first drafts. All right, one of them does, but we do not like her very much. We do not think that she has a rich inner life or that God likes her or can even stand her.[2]

Now, when you read that final sentence, you love Anne Lamott. However, if you are fallen, like me, then you suspect she is the writer of whom she speaks. If so, you want to take your shoe off and hit her twice on the head for being so crafty to appear so much like you, the writer without confidence and without the necessary elegant first drafts, and yet, possibly, she is the writer who writes brilliantly without second-guessing, without shame, without high-falutin' ideas about publication. And so, you might want to take your ergonomic, earth-friendly shoe and go thwack!, "There you go Anne for deceiving me," and, again, thwack!, "There you go Anne for being the one who really does write those publishable first drafts."

But it really isn't Anne I want to hit on the head; it is those other published authors I have been reading. I can't help but wonder, "Do these writers ever get rejected?" And most days, I think not.

As an academic, I have been in conversation with Marianne

1 I am indebted here to W. H. Auden's reading of Pieter Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (c. 1555). In "Musee des Beaux Arts" (1938), Auden notes that Icarus's fall, marked only by two white legs "disappearing into the green water," does not stop the everyday from carrying on. In the face of the suffering of others, "someone else is eating, or opening a window, or just walking dully along"; "everything turns away, quite leisurely from the disaster."

2 This quotation comes from Anne Lamott's ubiquitously quoted essay entitled "Shitty First Drafts" in *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life.* I have found this essay cited in almost every blog or book that discusses how one becomes a writer. See Lamott, Anne, "Shitty First Drafts," *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and LIfe*, Anchor Books, 1994, p. 21.

Hirsch,[3] Alison Landsberg,[4] Claude Lanzmann,[5] Dan Stone,[6] and James Young[7]—in just the last few weeks, often throughout the day—as I revise an essay, for the fifth time that I believe, at long last, will be published. None of them know I have been cogitating with them hour after hour, and yet I have. None of them know—i.e., the prolific and brilliant James Young—that I might want to take off my shoe and hit him on the head, and yet I do.

Not only do I think these authors never are rejected by the editorial staff at various journals, I also imagine that even when they bring a potluck dish or a wine to a dinner party, their offering is the one that is most exclaimed about. I didn't bring up the notion of a dish to share or the most-current wine capriciously.

For me, each of these individuals has become a familiar. When I contemplate my research about the Holocaust, I have been in conversation with them. I not only have read what they have to say, but I have imagined the dinners where they first fomented this notion for their next publication. Were they eating salmon or steak or something vegan? Did they drink a Pinot Noir or an iced green tea? Who did they invite to dinner when that notion first entered their head? And if it was James Young, did he grill an herbed salmon and did his wife prepare a salad with beets and orange slices for their guests?

Published writers, I imagine, lead perfect lives. They write with ease. Publication houses and journal editors seek them out. Not only are they admired for their writing, but they are admired for their witty conversation, the scarf they tie just so around their necks, their cheese soufflé that never ceases to astonish their guests.

And then there are the writers who write the pieces I wish I had written. I wanted to stomp my feet and tear up the draft when my colleague, Sandie Friedman,[8] brought her first draft of "How to Do Things with Titles" to our writing workshop. "But I want to write this piece," I kept thinking; "Why did you come up with this first and not me?" It is a very clever essay. I had an all-out tantrum when Cecelia Watson[9] published *Semicolon: The Past, Present, and Future of a Misunderstood Mark*. I have a well-honed lecture on the erotics of punctuation in which I make suggestive comments about punctuation marks, including the mutuality or excess of the semicolon (I screamed; she screamed. Or—her delight seemingly knew no bounds as it was expressed not only gutturally but also in the curling of her toes; it was expressed in her innermost thoughts that spiraled higher and then higher; it was expressed in the contentment after the crescendo; it was; it was; it was.) I read Watson's book twice in the same night. It was not only smart, but a delight. I wanted to write this book that was both smart and a delight. She used footnotes. I love footnotes. I swear by footnotes; they are where I often am at my best. *Semicolon* should have been my book.

AMITY

Like so many others, I love Kenneth Burke's[10] metaphor for writing an argument:

> Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them

3 Of late, I have been working with Holocaust photographs, memory, and "postmemory." Marianne Hirsch, one of the foremost scholars of the Holocaust, eloquently coined the term and the psychological, moral concept of postmemory. In "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory," Marianne Hirsch identifies one of the cruxes of the postmemorial relationship to the Shoah as the place wherein the viewer identifies with, and yet, ultimately, remains separated from the sufferer and his/her/their suffering. As Hirsch explains, postmemory "is defined through an identification with the victim or witness of trauma, modulated by the unbridgeable distance that separates the participant from the one born after" (p. 10). See Hirsch, Marianne, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory," *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 14, no. 1, Spring 2001, pp. 5-37.

4 Alison Landsberg has offered eloquent, compelling readings I vehemently oppose. In particular, I applaud and disagree with her reading of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993). See Landsberg, Alison, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture, Columbia UP, 2004.*

5 Claude Lanzmann is the creator of the masterpiece *Shoah* (1985)—a film that was 11 years in the making, is nine and one-half hours long, and explores witnessing (or the failure to bear witness) from the point of view of survivors, bystanders, and perpetrators.

6 Dan Stone has four books coming out in 2021. Need I say more? See *Fate Unknown: Tracing the Missing after the Holocaust and World War II*; *The Holocaust*; *Beyond Camps and Forced Labour*, editor; *Cambridge History of the Holocaust, Vol. 1*, editor.

7 James Young is a scholar who writes with brilliance and elegance. He is the foremost scholar of Holocaust memorials and most gracious when lesser scholars, such as myself, request permission to use one of his photographs in a publication. And yet, at times, I am so envious because he said something memorable about a monument I have just discovered and also am trying to analyze persuasively. At those times, I want to thump him on the head with my ever-practical shoe.

8 See Friedman, Sandie, "How to Do Things with Titles." *Writing on the Edge*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1 April 2012, pp.21-26.,

9 Run, really, put on your walking/jogging shoes and run to your local bookstore to buy her book. You won't believe how delightful it is until you actually read it. See Watson, Cecelia. *Semicolon: The Past, Present, and Future of a Misunderstood Mark*, HarperCollins, 2019.

10 See Burke, Kenneth, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 3rd edition, U of California P, 1973. pp. 110-111.

> got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers, you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

Many years ago when I was writing my dissertation about how modern playwrights staged the home, one of my readers said, "You really must take Bachelard[11] to task for voicing such sexist ideas about women's relationship to their homes." I loved Bachelard for his notion of interrogating where we go in our daydreams. What if Freud had made a similar observation? Wouldn't we have a vastly different understanding of the superego?

Bachelard wrote *The Poetics of Space* in the 1950s; I didn't feel it was right to dismiss his sense that women had a more intimate relationship with their homes. Moreover, I felt I had invited him into my dissertation. I was happy to have him there. He helped me think about what it meant for a playwright to set a play or part of a play in an attic or a bedroom or a living room. He helped me analyze what these rooms mean in the world of daydreams and what they might mean in the world of a particular play. When I thought of Bachelard, I thought of a lovely moussaka I would have liked to serve him if he ever came to dinner. In a similar vein, I thought of all of the scholars and dramatists in my dissertation as guests I wanted to honour with fine food. In my parlor conversations, food and drink also are involved. I see these individuals balancing plates, taking bites of this or that, sipping from a glass. They bring their "answers," but they also bring something more.

This sense of something more comes, in part, from the intimacy of feminist writers I read in the 80s. Dorothy Allison[12] not only shared with me the grittiness of her life in *Trash*, she also shared her erotic fantasies in *On Our Backs*. Jewelle Gomez[13] offered me gems of poems and her recipe for "Play-Cards-All-Night Chili" in *Cookin' with Honey: What Literary Lesbians Eat*. These writers not only offered me stories and arguments that altered how I saw myself and the world, they also invited me into their lives by sharing insights into who they were not only as writers but as flesh-and-blood women. Virginia Woolf[14] was one of the first to say women needed rooms of their own in order to write. In fact, the creation of rooms in homes may be credited with encouraging our sense of interiority, our inner thoughts, thoughts that call to be expressed in verbal or written form. Allison and Gomez made those rooms even more intimate as they opened their doors to their bedroom or their kitchen and allowed us to see not only where they write but also where they live, fully embodied as writers and as lesbians.

SHORING UP

Publishing is so intimate. When my writing is rejected, I feel I have been smote by both academic and creative writing journals. I also have felt simultaneously nurtured and bullied by editors and anonymous readers.

A number of years ago, an editor and an outside reader coached me through revising an essay I had submitted to a journal about teaching writing. In my piece, I discussed the ways two students engaged archival photographs from the Shoah. One set of photographs depicted the murder of a group of women in a ravine. I had included the images in the essay, and the editor informed me he wouldn't publish the images because they depicted this horrible atrocity.

I had multiple conversations with him in my head in which I tried to convince him that it was only logical to include the images because I was talking about the effect of these photographs on one student writer. Sometimes, by e-mail, I shared with him parts of my conversation. He was not persuaded. He pointed out that this journal was not a publication where one might expect to see atrocity photographs and thus he did not feel it was ethical to include them. I wanted to persist with my argument, and then one of the outside readers intervened with the simple statement: "Do you want to get this essay published?" And with that statement, that I always have imagined was followed by a truly exasperated sigh, my reader made me stop whining.

I wanted my piece published, and I wanted it published ethically. I finally realized that there were ethics on the editor's side as well in terms of his duties to his readership/audience. I also knew that if this editor and reader were to come dinner, I would apologize for being so obstinate and would make them rainbow trout with tarragon, vegetable pancakes, radicchio salad, flan, and would serve a well-chilled Pinot Gris.

Shoring up publications never becomes more real than in May when annual reports are due. Every year, when I write my report, I recall my Catholic past. I imagine all of my sins of omission—the papers I wrote that did not find a home; the committees I might have joined, but didn't; those unhappy students I never made happy. I try to imagine celebrating myself, celebrating my year, and I fall flat. Many days of the year I feel I am doing meaningful work;

11 See Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space* (*La Poétique de l'Espace*, 1958), translated by Maria Jolas, Orion Press, 1964.

12 See Allison, Dorothy, *Trash: Short Stories*, Firebrand Books, 1988 and/or *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Dutton, 1992.

13 See Gomez, Jewelle, *Oral Tradition: Selected Poems Old and New*, Firebrand Books, 1995 and/or *The Best Lesbian Erotica of 1997*, Cleis, 1997.

14 See Woolf, Virginia, *A Room of One's Own*, Hogarth Press, 1929.

however, every time annual reports come around, I feel mendicant, rice bowl in hand.

As I write down each presentation, publication, submission in revision, I hear the words of Eliot's[15] Fisher King in my head: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins." I wonder, will what I have done be enough? Mendicant. Supplicant. Possibly ruined. Months pass before I receive word from my director and the dean. It has been thirty-five years of annual reports, and when I read the director's or the dean's comments—no matter if they are at times laudatory—I don't feel buoyed, only a sense of relief. Once again, I have been spared, and I prepare to shore myself up one more time.

PERSISTENCE

My appointment requires that I publish. I am thankful for that requirement; it keeps me in conversation. And yet there is very little time in the semester for going to an archive, tracking down a reference in a footnote, spending enough time to really think through the nuances of a given argument. There are too many papers to comment on, too many sections to teach, too many students to meet to carve out the space for hours of reading and rereading as well as writing, rewriting, and unwriting (I can't bring myself to say the dreadful word: *deleting*).

When the time permits, I relish this effort to be in conversation, to fully examine why I do what I do in the classroom, to think through what a given effort to memorialize the Holocaust means, to analyze the ways talking about menstruation have changed.

And yet, I often find myself wondering if there could be greater largesse when it comes to the work editors of both academic and creative publications accept. Shouldn't creative writing journals do something more than send form letters (a modicum of feedback would be a start)? Would it be possible to publish pieces of writing still in process (Adrienne Rich's[16] "Notes toward a Politics of Location" comes to mind, where she ends her essay with the following sentence: "This is the end of these notes, but it is not an ending."). Why must scholarship purport to be so polished, so authoritative, so absolute? Shouldn't publication be about enlarging the circle of who we read and who reads us? Wouldn't a journal benefit from including something that isn't their usual fare?

I keep writing. I keep trying to publish. And each time, I go through each of the six stages; sometimes I dwell more in one stage than another. Often I live barraged by all six: I send out this piece for final review; I receive word that another piece has been rejected and I can't find it in me to literally add that rejection letter to the others in order to "earn" 100 rejections; Sandie brings another essay to our writing group that I believe I should be writing; a reviewer offers me concrete suggestions for revision and says she enthusiastically supports the publication of my work; at long last, I am asked to sign the contributor contract for a chapter I wrote three years ago.

And then I imagine creating a series of erasure poems from the rejection letter I received, the reviewer's suggestions for revision, the contributor contract poem. And so begins the ongoing struggle, the internal conversation: should I begin playing with the erasure poems or should I tackle the pile of student assignments I need to grade . . .

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15 See Eliot, T. S, "The Waste Land," www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land. Accessed 3 February 2020.

16 See Rich, Adrienne, "Notes toward a Politics of Location," *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*, Norton, 1994, p. 231.

On *Cucuys* in Bird's Feathers: A Counterstory as Parable

Aja Y. Martinez

Aja Y. Martinez is assistant professor of writing and rhetoric at the University of North Texas. Dr. Martinez's greater body of work and expertise in critical race counterstory is a methodological contribution to race critical studies through the well-established framework of critical race theory (CRT). Her single-authored monograph, *Counterstory: The Writing and Rhetoric of Critical Race Theory*, has been published with Studies in Writing and Rhetoric.

Abstract

This counterstory reviews central topics of mentorship and writing/publishing collaborations as parable. While maintaining pressure on the audience to read/see themselves in the fictional characters within, this counterstory-as-parable expands the voice, style, citation practice, and genre possibilities for discussions that are difficult to engage due to power imbalances and precarity within the profession for graduate students and junior professors. This counterstory as parable is an invitation to discuss the important topics of mentorship and writing/publishing, particularly for audience members who maintain the power and privilege of working with emerging scholars (i.e., graduate program professors and senior scholars).

Keywords

critical race theory, counterstory, mentoring, publishing, writing

Critical race theorist Richard Delgado has outlined several generic styles counterstories can take: chronicles, narratives, allegories, parables, and dialogues (2438). In this essay I extend his discussion of counterstory by exploring the power of the parable—a nod to writers like Octavia Butler and to writers of my heritage, such as Ana Castillo, who invoke magical realism with their words. I made the methodological choice to write about the topics of mentorship and writing/publishing collaborations as counterstory because this narrative approach provides me as an author a flexibility with which to discuss key concerns and to present data in ways that do not directly identify or name persons, organizations, institutions, or fields to which to apply the topics and lessons of this parable. Instead, this counterstory reviews the central topics of this story-as-parable while maintaining pressure on the audience to (based on their own lived actions and experiences) read/see themselves in the fictional characters within. In the case of this essay, counterstory expands the voice, style, citation practice, and genre possibilities for a discussion of mentorship and writing/publishing collaborations I maintain as an invitation to this conversation for my audience—particularly for audience members who maintain the power and privilege of working with emerging scholars (i.e., graduate program professors and senior scholars).

In all, critical race theory (CRT) counterstory functions as a method for writers to intervene in research methods that would form master narratives based on ignorance and assumptions about minoritized and/or vulnerable populations, such as graduate students and junior professionals. Through the formation of counterstories, those stories that document the persistence of inequities and other forms of subordination told "from the perspectives of those injured and victimized by its legacy" (Yosso 10), voices with less power or platform become central in the researching and relating of our own experiences. As a writing method, critical race counterstory is a theoretically grounded research approach that draws on an interdisciplinary approach with roots in ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, history, the humanities, and the law. Counterstory challenges privilege and recognizes that experiential knowledge of minoritized and/or vulnerable populations is legitimate and critical to understanding the structural power imbalances and abuses alive and well within our professional lives, organizations,

institutions, and mentoring relationships. Counterstory, then, functions as a method to empower minoritized and/or vulnerable populations with a skill set with which to intervene in the erasures accomplished in master narratives. In all, the parable approach of this essay discusses and *shows* how counterstory as a method can apply toward a field-wide conversation of mentorship and writing/publishing collaborations.

COUNTERSTORY AS PARABLE

Once upon a time, there was a small but strong and loving *familia* of *pájaritos.* The members of this small family of birds were not related by birth but by a shared and acknowledged lineage, so they each displayed very different feathers, beaks, shapes, and sizes. These *pájaritos* sang a beautiful harmonious song, and they named themselves *Nos Golondrinxs de la Verdad* but were known to outsiders as just The Gols*. Nos Golondrinxs* embraced the diversity amongst their small flock, and they cared about justice and access for all birds to a good life with plenty of nourishing birdseed to eat, plenty of resources to build a nest, and plenty of air and space to voice their beautiful individual and collective songs.

As the years passed, *Nos Golondrinxs* grew and multiplied, and within each new generation there emerged new beautiful songs, projected further than the generations of *pájaritos* before. These new songs were strong and beautiful only because they built on the foundation and knowledge of *Nos Golondrinxs'* elders who came before them. Outsider flocks, more robust in their size (in stature and collective numbers) who, had previously paid *Nos Golondrinxs* no mind due to their smaller size, became increasingly aware of this *familia* and began to wonder from whence they drew their collective strength, knowledge, and songs. Some Outsider flocks even began to sing songs about The Gols, but these songs were often sung for or about the *familia,* resulting in songs that fell on the ears of *Nos Golondrinxs* as out of tune and disharmonious with the songs the *familia* sang about themselves. Without inviting *Nos Golondrinxs* to sing with them, these Outsiders just never got the tunes right.

As additional time passed and as more *pájaritos* joined *Nos Golondrinxs'* flock, a Delegation within the *familia* formed through their collective insecurity and jealousy toward the beautiful songs being sung by their fellow *pájaritos.* Although this Delegation of *pájaritos* were welcome and accepted with love and openness to *Nos Golondrinxs*, unbeknownst to the *familia,* members of this Delegation often flew to Outsider territories and fed on birdseed poisoned with hate and resentment. This food nourished their bodies but clouded their minds. This birdseed convinced members of the Delegation that their *familia* in *Nos Golondrinxs* were their competition for food, nesting materials, and notes for new beautiful songs and thus were not to be trusted. Because members of the Delegation increasingly viewed members of their *familia* as competitors instead of collaborators, and because this poisoned birdseed clouded their brains and slowly deteriorated their vocal cords, the Delegation, who became increasingly incapable of fashioning new notes, composing new songs, or singing in harmony, devised a strategy.

As new *pájaritos* joined the flock, the Delegation were strategically amongst the first to welcome these young birds to the *familia*. Seeing these new birds as an opportunity to hopefully sing once more, the Delegation offered their "mentorship" to these eager new *pájaritos*. Excited about the prospect of being welcomed so enthusiastically and (seemingly) lovingly to a vibrant and active *familia*, the new *pájaritos* were only too willing to jump at the opportunity to collaborate on new songs when offered the opportunity by the Delegation. As is well known, the very lifeblood and survival of *pájaritos* hinges on the creation of songs. Thus, the opportunity to make music with more experienced *pájaritos* was too important an offering to pass up.

However, as the collaborations between new *pájaritos* and "mentors" from the Delegation progressed, the new *pájaritos* began to notice their Delegation collaborators did not produce notes. Troubled but unsure of how to broach this concern with their "mentors"—who after all had been making music within *Nos Golondrinxs* for a very long time—the new *pájaritos* did their best to contribute their best notes and to sing their beautiful songs. When other members of *Nos Golondrinxs* praised the new *pájaritos* and their "mentors" for the beautiful new songs, the new *pájaritos* noted the way their "mentors" reveled in the praise and never made known how little they contributed to these new songs. Eventually, as the new *pájaritos* grew in wisdom and experience, they tired of these one-sided collaborations with their Delegation "mentors" and made moves to sever ties. Enraged by being cut off from their song fonts, Delegation members often flew off to Outsider spaces to publicly lash out at their former mentees. However, because members of the Delegation cannot sing beautiful songs without the labor and innovation of new *pájaritos*, their lashing out sorely lacks in harmonious veracity and sounds much more like the song of a seagull: "Mine. Mine. Mine." But to the ears of an Outsider, their songs sound like *la Verdad.*

Thus, the moral of this story is: Beware the members of the Delegation who lurk amongst your flock and *familia,* preying on your most vulnerable in the guise of "mentorship." Take care of the new *pájaritos.* Our silence will not protect us and we cannot know about the Delegation through whispers and a lack of accountability. Call their shit out, and if warranted and deserved, do it with compassion and care. The health of the collective is central if we are to survive the Outside(rs). And above all, make beautiful music in the spirit of solidarity, coalition, and *comadrismo* (Licona and Chávez; Ribero and Arellano). Everything/anything else is just seagull squawk.

The End

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A Bridge Across Our Fears

Excerpts from the Annals of Bean[1]

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Abstract
Grounded in critical race theory and employing counterstory, this excerpt from "the Annals of Bean" recounts the experience of a white and whitely professor contending with her white and whitely nemeses, which turn out not only to be her student, Bean, but also and perhaps especially, herself.

Key words
whiteliness, white privilege, anti-racism, anti-racist pedagogy, counterstory

A CONFEDERACY OF BEANS

On the first day of class, I recognize Bean immediately. Bean is a white guy who has taken every class I've ever taught. This semester, he has chosen a seat in the corner farthest from where I stand. He keeps his coat on with his hood up and tucks his head down as if this will make him invisible. Sometimes, Bean sits in the front row with his legs splayed wide before him so anyone who attempts to walk by him is likely to trip over his feet, but Bean never, ever sits in the middle. During some terms, Bean is a vocal participant in class discussion. In fact, sometimes Bean barely lets me get a word in edgewise. He stops me as I work my way through some key concept.

"Do I actually mean to say blah blah blah? Because blah blah blah, who is a very famous scholar of blah blah blah—whose work I am, perhaps, unfamiliar with says thus and so."

Sometimes Bean interrupts his classmates with "well-actualies" and "in-point-of-facts." And sometimes Bean seems to carefully compose lengthy speeches so as to make interrupting him not merely a challenge but an impossibility.

1 Once, when I was young, I visited the Long Island summer home of a wealthy friend. Also visiting was a wealthy young man—the college chum of my friend's sister. This young man spent the week calling my friend's dad "Old Bean." My friend and I were both amused and annoyed by this nomenclature. "Old Bean" is a term of endearment sometimes used among American blue bloods on the East Coast, especially by young men who attend the same posh boarding schools in preparation for their further education at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, or Brown. "Old Bean" is the mark of shared privilege as well as of conviviality, of familiarity as well as class solidarity. My use of the name, Bean, marks the privilege Bean and I share and, in its strangeness, lifts the character of Bean up and away from the relative invisibility and normalization of whiteness, white privilege, white supremacy, and whiteliness that is enabled when he is merely one among many.

Sometimes, however—and this appears to be one of those times—Bean says *nothing*. His eyes, like a Nazgul's, burn beneath his hood. Occasionally, I catch a small smirk twitch his lips as I make some point or other or when a classmate speaks. At the end of class, a queue of students forms to ask a question that seems too personal to ask in front of classmates, to let me know about sports or family obligations, or simply to introduce themselves. Bean joins the queue, waving students lining up behind him to move ahead so he can be the last one to speak with me. He wants the last word. I sigh inwardly. "Oh, Bean," I think, "here we go again."

When at last the other students have departed, Bean grills me.

"What are the assignments for this course? What are the required readings? How will we be graded?"

Ironically, I designed this course, titled The Discourse of Dissent, to encourage students to press back against the rules of school that might constrain their ability to "claim" their education and assert their agency as learners, as Adrienne Rich once suggested. I have urged them to question authority—including my own. Somehow, I feel, Bean has missed the point.

"Bean," I say. "All of these things are in the course outline. Why don't you have a look at it and then come to my office hours with whatever questions still feel unanswered to you."

Bean appears not to have heard. As I pack up my things, he wonders whether I have made errors in the syllabus.

As I depart the classroom and begin my trek across campus toward my office, Bean trots along beside me, suggesting required readings: books he has read in other courses that might be better suited for this class than the texts I have chosen. As we arrive at my office door, I ask Bean as kindly as I can why it is that he chose this class. "What do you most want to learn?," I ask him.

Bean says, "I want to learn where that intersectional feminism thing comes from. I want to know where those girls went wrong and what to do about them."

Bean has made of his whiteliness a fine art. In an essay entitled "White Woman Feminist," Marilyn Frye describes "being whitely (like being masculine) . . . as a deeply ingrained way of being in the world" (Frye). She writes that "whitely people generally consider themselves to be benevolent and good-willed, fair, honest and ethical" (Frye). Whitely folks are best equipped to judge, to preach, to martyr themselves or decide who should. Whitely people know what's right, and generally what's right is what they think, what they say, and how they say it. "Whitely people," says Frye, "have a staggering faith in their own rightness and goodness, and that of other whitely people" (Frye). As Black anthropologist John Langston Gwaltney says, "White people are not supposed to be stupid, so they tend to think they are intelligent, no matter how stupidly they are behaving" (96). Bean embodies a kind of toxic stew of whiteliness and masculinism. He takes up a lot of space no matter which version of white he is performing in any given semester.

Several years ago, I was sitting in a hotel bar with Neisha Anne Green. We had just met and would be presenting on the same conference panel the next day on the subject of anger as performance rhetoric. If the truth be told, we were spending as much time kvetching about annoying white women as we were giving one another feedback on our conference papers. We might have been on our second or third glass of wine when Neisha Anne got down to it.

"Frankie!" she said. "Frankie! I am so done. You gotta snatch your people, Frankie, cuz I am fucking OUT. I mean OUT."

We laughed. And we both knew she wasn't kidding.

I've travelled around to a lot of colleges and universities to talk about racism and teach antiracism. I am often asked by white faculty—mostly white women, to be honest—to prescribe just exactly *how* antiracist pedagogy is to be done. My experience has been, however, that no answer I give seems precise enough, direct enough to meet their needs. In my most frustrated and judgey moments, I think what the folks who demand a prescription really want is a way to *appear* to be doing antiracism work without having to read anything any Person of Colour has written, talk with any Person of Colour, let alone cite a Person of Colour. I think they want a way to *appear* to be doing antiracism work without having to take on their own internalized white supremacy, their own white privilege, and their own whiteliness. They want to do the thing and get the credit without making the change. Hell, I wanna do that sometimes too. Change is hard. And when it comes to white supremacy, to racism, to whiteliness, it seems like you make a change and then you fail. You make another change and fail again. The idea that as a white person you're ever going to be done with all the changing you need to do is some fierce kind of hallucination.

Neisha Anne says I need to snatch my people, says that's my job if I'm to be her accomplice in the struggle against racism. I stare at Bean as we stand outside my office door.

"Bean," I think, "you are first in line, pal! I'm going to work on you and while I do I'm going to learn to keep on working on myself."

Because you just can't snatch your people without snatching yourself too.

BEANISHNESS

One sunny autumn day, my students and I gather in a bright classroom for a discussion of social justice discourses. Today we are

beginning to explore, in the most tentative and precarious way, the rhetorical means by which folks are persuaded that they share common cause—or not—with other folk and the ways antiracist social movements in particular form and move from common cause to political action.

Bean is still sitting about as far away from me as he can get. He's a bit rattled by this course. There are a lot of smart Feminists of Colour in it and rather than avoiding Bean they choose to sit at the table he has chosen for his own. He has yet to make a contribution to class discussion this term, but today Bean is staring at me unblinkingly—his focus, his energy, his need to be heard vibrating in the air around his still form.

"Bean," I say, having decided that we might as well get things out on the table and that the other students are centred and strong enough to hear it. "Bean, you look like you've got something brewing in there? What's going on?"

"It's not what anybody *says* that makes *me* not join," he says. "I don't join because I don't really care. I don't have anything to gain, no skin in the game." Bean doesn't smirk. He means it and he's serious.

After class, Bean walks me to my office again. As we circumnavigate the Canada geese who waddle along our campus walkways, hissing if you meet their eye or come too close, Bean explains things to me:

"The problem," he says, "is that *these people* go too far, they're extremists."

"Who are 'these people,' Bean?" I ask.

He skirts the question. "What I mean is," as if I didn't understand his point, "*these people* make up problems and then they make those problems so huge and they aren't even problems to begin with."

"But Bean," I say, "who are 'these people?'"

"Like, take the Civil Rights Movement, for example."

I sigh inwardly. "Men," I think, "explain things to me—even young ones."

Bean is on a roll now. "The Civil Rights Movement, *they* didn't need to do all that stuff; everybody knew, I mean *everybody* knew that what was happening was wrong. *Everybody* knew."

"I'm not sure that everybody knew, Bean." I say. "To suggest such a thing is to elide history: 500 years of slavery, which clearly not everyone knew was wrong, but also the meagre measures of Reconstruction, the sabotage of Black people by Southerners and sympathetic Northerners, the rise of Jim Crow, the lynchings . . ." I am about to say "that, frankly, continue to this day" because I'm on a roll now and getting a little, shall we say, het up.

But Bean interrupts me. "Are you sure? Because history shows that everybody knew."

I run through the possible responses in my head. I'm a bit stuck on the "are you sure?" and considering trotting out my CV. I'm even more stuck on the "history shows" and considering how I could name the thousands, literally thousands of books and articles by scholars across a host of disciplines that demonstrate the absurdity of his claim. But I'm utterly stuck on the "these people" and the "everybody." He will-not-say-the-words. But I know: as a teacher, as a scholar, and from my fifty-seven-year-old GUT I know—"everybody" is white people and "these people" are Peoples of Colour. Bean will not say the words but they vibrate between us. He is disguising his anger as I am disguising mine, and what he thinks is the ambiguity of those terms is his disguise. Mine is the teacher mode into which I have moved: the "Socratic Method" that buries my rage in the carefully phrased and nicely turned questions "Who are 'these people,' Bean?" "Where did you learn to think that, Bean?"

Bean, I realize, will be with me not only for the next eleven weeks but apparently forever. I have got to figure out how to get under this Bean's skin. But there are thirty-nine other students in my class—many of them students of colour. Why then do I feel so compelled to teach to and for Bean? I feel my body rising to meet my rage—at Bean, but also at myself. I breathe. My students and I will read together Barbara Deming's extraordinary essay "On Anger." In it, she writes that "there is clearly a kind of anger that is healthy. It is the concentration of one's whole being in the determination: this must change." "This kind of anger," she continues," is not in itself violent—even when it raises its voice (which it sometimes does); and brings about agitation, confrontation (which it always does). It contains both respect for oneself and respect for the other. To oneself it says: 'I must change—for I have been playing the part of the slave.' To the other it says: 'You must change—for you have been playing the part of the tyrant.' It contains the conviction that change is possible—for both sides; and it is capable of transmitting this conviction to others, touching them with the energy of it—even one's antagonist."

Bean's anger is not the healthy kind. And God knows I'm trying, but mine isn't either.

I need to get away from Bean right now. I need to breathe, I need to think, I need him to step back! I need to step away.

"Bean," I say, "I will be very curious to hear your views once you've actually done some reading."

I step into my office and close the door. Still fuming, I sit in at my

desk staring at my bookshelves. I have no idea where to begin. I tell myself I am afraid of Bean: afraid of Bean's judgement, his derisiveness, his dismissiveness, that he may actually catch me out one day and publicly humiliate me. I have felt scorn for other white cisgender women who tut-tut about their own precarity and their worries about not being liked, their fluttery nervousness about making students and colleagues feel uncomfortable and about "putting their careers at risk"—as they justify inaction. This justification, I have often thought, serves to relieve white women who claim it of responsibility for intervening in or even speaking to the material realities of racism and white supremacy. Of course, to relieve oneself of that responsibility, however, is to lay it on someone else's shoulders: most often on the shoulders of Women of Colour. This is one way whiteliness operates or, more accurately, one way white women employ whiteliness to absolve themselves and, concomitantly, implicate People of Colour as the ones who must both act and bear the risks of acting. But I have been using my anger to disguise the degree to which I'm tapping into the same attachment to the comfort of privilege and calling that attachment "fear." That I can even consider *not* intervening should be, for me, an indication that it's time to check my privilege. I need time to do some come-to-Jeezus thinking. I need to ask myself, am I more concerned with Bean's anger than with the possibility of failing all of the students who are not Bean? Am I *that* white woman? That whitely woman? I have to snatch myself!

(MAKING) TROUBLE IN BEAN TOWN

In her essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," Audre Lorde writes that "poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before" (356). In the preface to his 1993 edition of *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*, Derrick Bell also advocates for literary forms—in this case, for allegory, narrative, and (counter)story as a means of illuminating the permanence of structural racism and, concomitantly, sustaining and encouraging resistance and hope. Derrick Bell aligns with Frantz Fanon in arguing that racism is "an integral, permanent, and indestructible component" of western society (xiii). In this context, Bell acknowledges the challenge he and other antiracist scholars, activists, and revolutionaries have faced in telling "the truth about racism without causing disabling despair" (xiii). Fanon, Bell notes, holds, simultaneously, two apparently contradictory perspectives: the first that structural racism possesses permanence and the second that resistance to structural racism is constituted in the iterative processes of creating the self in spite of and against racism's inevitability.

Noting Martin Luther King's recognition and embrace of the necessity to speak the truths about racism that "alienated rather than unified, upset minds rather than calmed hearts," Bell acknowledges implicitly, at least, that the point of writing against racism is to give to Peoples of Colour and Black People, in particular, that affirmation and uplift that attends hearing the truth of their lived experience under racism—truth that structural racism systematically suppresses and denies. On the other hand, the creative practice of truth- telling, Bell suggests is, in fact, to agitate and unsettle: to "harass" white people—to make living in the white-supremacist world our people created, and that we participate in sustaining and reproducing, at least less comfortable and perhaps more miserable.

Perhaps, I reflect, these things are true for teaching as well as for writing against racism. The challenge is discerning how to uplift by affirming the lived experience of Students of Colour with racism *and* unsettle the complacency, the comfort, the privilege of white students in ways that are learningful for us all; to enact, model, and engage antiracist interventions in the real time of the classroom and beyond. Attending this challenge, for me as a white woman, is the necessity for awareness of my own enactments of privilege, of my own tendencies to slip out from under any responsibility to act. I must be willing to go wholeheartedly for critical self-reflection absent any conviction that I ever finish with this work. In the public spaces of the classroom, the hallways of my university, my office as I meet and talk with students, I will need to do this work for as long as I am working. I am unnerved, I think, by Bean and even more so by the immediacy of responsibility with which I am confronted as we speak. I tell myself I am afraid, then check myself.

To feel harassed and thus to be uncomfortable, to sense the precarity of one's position, one's commonplaces, one's commonsenses—to feel fragile—is not the same thing as to be afraid. Fear is a language the body speaks. The words "I am afraid" have no meaning in this tongue. What signifies instead may be the bitter taste of blood and bile. Perhaps a prickling along the scalp, a *frisson* that skitters up skin and down bone. A sudden immobility—the dreamlike inability to run as eye, ear, or some inexplicable sense of danger screams GO at frozen limbs. Fear has a grammar and a rhetoric, and from within the maelstrom between those two, the body shapes its utterances. The body speaks fear. What I feel, what Bean feels, is not and never was fear; this is not the language we are speaking. Whiteliness simulates fear even as it insulates white bodies from fear's affects. Bean and I are talking whitely, contending over which of us is the more right and the better arbiter of the good; our whitely affects, whether anger or fear or both all-at-once disguising our various absolutions.

The afternoon sunlight filters through my office windows, catches on the blooms of the geraniums that sit upon my window sill, slips along the rows of books that line my bookshelves, and alights on an abstract painting representing the wicked problem of racism given to me by a former student. I know where to start, and I know starting means heading into the outside edges of what I know, means essaying into the unknown.

"Bean," I say aloud to the stillness of my office, "I am coming for you, pal!" I'm going to teach every class for the people you

despise. I'm going to make you uncomfortable—on purpose. And every whitely move you make, I'm going to name and attempt an intervention. In all likelihood, I am going to fail—and when I do I'm going to model what it looks like to acknowledge one's failure in the struggle against racism, to learn from that failure, and then to get on up and out and try again. Bean, I'm going to embrace the opportunity your presence in my classes presents to teach students of colour and their white accomplices as many wicked, smart, creative, tricky, funny, and fierce ways as I can imagine for interrupting and intervening, challenging and, yes, harassing white folks when we go to whiteliness. Then, we're going to talk about what worked and what didn't, why, and what to do differently next time.

I'm going to call myself out, Bean, even as I call out to you. You won't be alone. I'm going to teach that we all have a role to play in the struggle for racial justice—not the same role as people of colour may have, but a role nonetheless. I'm going to teach that Cornel West's question 'What needs to *die* in you in order to *be hope*?' resonates differently, but powerfully, for all of us. I am going to challenge myself, and, Bean, I'm going to challenge you too—to sit with that question. What needs to die in us in order that we may learn, and through learning, change?

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